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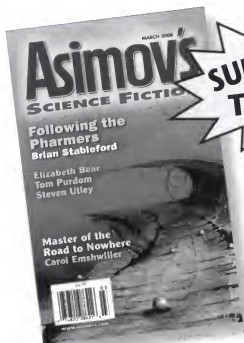
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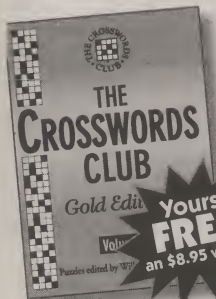
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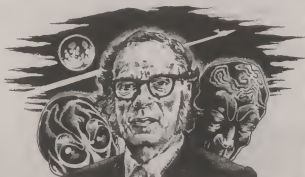


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**A**simov's hits another important milestone with the publication of our April/May 2009 issue. With its arrival, we celebrate the four hundred opportunities we've had to showcase science fiction and fantasy short stories. When I realized this moment was nearly upon us, I contacted the issue's contributors for their thoughts on the occasion. Robert Reed replied, "Congratulations, *Asimov's*! Here's to the next six-hundred issues!" while Brian Stableford said, "Many congratulations on reaching the four hundredth issue; *Asimov's* has made tremendous progress over that time to become the leader in the field, and continues to make an invaluable contribution to the promotion and showcasing of SF short fiction—which has always occupied a precious place at the heart of the genre. I've been very proud to have been featured fairly regularly in the magazine over the last two decades, and hope to continue that association for many years to come." In the midst of his congratulations, Brian neatly summed up what *Asimov's* is all about. It is a venue that nurtures and celebrates the short story. The stories receive some of this nurturing from the magazine and its editors, but most it comes from you—the people who read and support the stories and authors that you discover here.

One of our long-time readers is Kristine Kathryn Rusch, the author and former editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. On a recent walk, she realized that "I'd met most of my favorite SF/F writers in the pages of *Asimov's*. I first read Connie Willis, Michael Swanwick, James Patrick Kelly, and Nancy Kress in its pages. I never miss Bob Silverberg's column. And since I've quit editing, I'm always happy to see my favorite writers, the ones I used to buy

from, showing up in *Asimov's*—people like Robert Reed and Mary Rosenblum. I'm also happy to see all the new writers, too, and I look forward to seeing more of their work in the future." Going Bob Reed one better, Kris adds, "I hope that *Asimov's* will be around for four thousand issues. That seems close to forever. But forever is good too."

Chris Beckett is one of those newer writers. Chris writes, "Congratulations to *Asimov's* on reaching your four hundredth issue: quite an achievement. Many would argue that the short story is science fiction's crowning glory. If so, *Asimov's* has done as much as anyone to nurture it. Writers like me owe a huge amount to magazines like this that make it possible for our tales to see the light of day." The authors owe most of their thanks to you, because you have proven to be extremely receptive to the works of new writers. On more than one occasion, you haven't hesitated to hand out the annual Readers' Awards to a story by an author making his or her first appearance in our pages. Three such winners that come immediately to my mind are Alan Gordon's "Digital Music" (# 220), Darryl Gregory's "Second Person, Present Tense" (# 356), and Elizabeth Bear's "Tideline" (# 377). Looking over the early returns for the twenty-third annual awards, I can see that some of this year's first-timers are in the running. Readers tell me that the discovery of new authors in *Asimov's* often leads to the authors' novels and a long-term enjoyment of their fiction.

*Asimov's* has primarily been a home for science fiction, but we've also published some fantasy and a smattering of those weird and indefinable stores. Perhaps it is those unclassifiable tales that led Michael Swanwick to make the obvi-

ous connection between our latest issue and the Battle of Thermopylae. Michael says, "Ah, the four hundredth issue of *Asimov's*! It is on this hallowed text that we celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the fabled three hundred—the issue where a mere handful of Spartan writers turned aside the seemingly unstoppable onslaught of Xerxes' Persian army of conquest. Though faced with more than a million opponents, a small force of genre writers led by King Leonidas held the pass of Thermopylae. This action was one of the most glorious literary events of all history. According to Herodotus, when a representative of the Persians boasted that their arrows would darken the sun, the Dieneces retorted, "Then we shall write in the shade!" Or maybe that's just Michael being Michael. It is in the shade of *Asimov's*, though, that writers like Michael have the freedom to follow the associations of their imaginations, and to take us along with them.

The magazine's longevity seemed to have crept up on the unsuspecting Nancy Kress. She says, "Four hundred issues! I didn't realize it was that many (although she knows that she should have. A story of hers appeared in our fifth issue), but these days, four hundred isn't old. In fact, four hundred is the new two hundred, and *Asimov's* is just entering its prime, healthy and full of juice. In fact, four hundred may even be the new one hundred. . . ."

We're hitting our prime with terrific stories and new ideas. While most of you read *Asimov's* paper editions, sales of our electronic editions are growing. We're doing well at **Fictionwise.com** and the Kindle editions of *Asimov's* are selling briskly at **Amazon.com**. New to our own website, **Asimovs.com**, is a monthly movie review. Also at our website, you'll find links to podcasts of some of your favorite *Asimov's* stories. These podcasts are courtesy of **Starshipsofa.com**, the audio science fiction magazine. I'm sure you'll find lots of exciting new stories and innovations in the six hundred or six thousand issues that lie ahead. ○

# Asimov's

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won 46 Hugos and 27 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 18 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.

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## REREADING VAN VOGT

Over the last couple of years I've been rereading some of the books that made powerful impressions on me when I was a beginning reader of science fiction, some sixty years ago—books by Robert A. Heinlein, Jack Vance, Olaf Stapledon, Theodore Sturgeon. Now I come to one that left me utterly baffled, but not unfascinated or undelighted, when I first encountered it back then as a high-school sophomore: A.E. van Vogt's *The World of Null-A*. I was less baffled this time around, but less fascinated and less delighted also.

It's important to note that I imposed a major handicap on myself the first time I read this perplexing novel. It was serialized in three parts in *Astounding Science Fiction*, the dominant SF magazine of its era, beginning in the August 1945 issue. I began reading *Astounding* in 1948, and quickly began buying back issues in second-hand bookstores. It happened that I found the September 1945 issue, containing Part II of the serial, before I found the first part. Because van Vogt's novel was so famous in its day, I couldn't wait to find the opening segment, but began with Part II, which provided a synopsis of the previous installment that I hoped would help me make sense of the second section.

Reader, it didn't help me at all. Coming in in the middle as I was, I found that the story was the purest gibberish to my adolescent mind. Lively gibberish, yes, but gibberish all the same.

A couple of months later I found the magazine containing Part I, and read that, and then, soon after, Part III. So I had now read the entirety of this celebrated novel, but I had read the parts out of order. Small wonder that I was perplexed! (I also got Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, the book from which van Vogt had drawn the idea for his novel,

from the library. My adolescent mind found it opaque and impenetrable. Later I learned that most older readers have the same reaction.) A year or so later, I acquired the hardcover edition of the novel—Simon & Schuster had published it in 1948, the first time a major New York publisher had reprinted a novel from one of the science fiction magazines—and read it again, this time in proper order. It still didn't make much sense. And now I have read it for the third, and probably final time. This time around it still seemed pretty nonsensical in some ways—but in others, because of van Vogt's revisions of the earlier text along the way, it struck me as not being nonsensical enough. I will endeavor to explain.

*The World of Null-A* was the beneficiary of powerful hype when it first landed on the science fiction audience of 1945. John Campbell, the editor of *Astounding* and the mightiest figure in the SF world at that time, announced it to his readers with a paragraph describing the arrival of the manuscript at his house while the writers Theodore Sturgeon and George O. Smith were visiting him. "I read the first few paragraphs of that yarn aloud about 11 PM, just before going to bed—so I thought. It's a van Vogt novel. You know van Vogt's trick of putting fishhooks in the first few paragraphs—they go in easily, but you can't back out; you have to go all the way through. . . . Well and securely hooked, we passed pages down the line. I finished the yarn at about 5 AM, with Sturgeon and Smith a few pages behind." He would begin serializing the story in the August issue, and, because of the wartime paper shortages, Campbell pointed out, it would be wise for readers to subscribe to the magazine to be certain of getting every installment,

rather than taking their chances finding the issues on the newsstand. "I think most of you know me well enough to know I'm not given to extravagant and unmerited advance encomiums. This is one of the super-stories."

And a super-story is how it has been regarded over the decades that followed. A reader poll in 1952 rated it the fourteenth greatest SF book of all time. A 1956 poll placed it ninth. A decade later, a similar survey put it in eighteenth place. The Hugo award did not exist in 1945, but when 1945 "retro-Hugo" trophies were voted on fifty years later, *The World of Null-A* finished second, behind one of Isaac Asimov's Foundation novels. Van Vogt wrote two sequels to it, one in 1948 and another many years later, and in 2008 Tor Books published *Null-A Continuum* by John C. Wright, yet another sequel written with the permission of van Vogt's estate. It is fair to say that *The World of Null-A* has had classic status in the SF field virtually from the day of its first publication.

There was one conspicuous dissent from that evaluation, though—published just weeks after the third installment of the magazine serialization. It was the work of Damon Knight, then a twenty-three-year-old science fiction fan, who would go on to become a major SF writer himself as well as an incisive and important critic of science fiction: a lengthy essay published in the November 1945 issue of *Destiny's Child*, an amateur SF magazine. Knight's demolition of the van Vogt novel is still in print in a revised version in *In Search of Wonder*, that invaluable compilation of Knight's critical essays. I am grateful to Greg Pickersgill of Wales, a noted collector of the ephemeral mimeographed magazines of SF fandom, for supplying me with the text of the original 1945 piece.

"Demolition" is the right word: "Far from being a 'classic' by any reasonable standard, *World of Null-A* is one of the worst allegedly adult scientifiction stories ever published," Knight wrote. He promised "to prove that assertion by an

analysis of the story on four levels: Plot, Characterization, Background, and Style." And he devoted thirteen closely packed pages to an onslaught in those four areas, quoting liberally to demonstrate that the plot is "muddled and self-contradictory," the character portrayals are inconsistent, the background is haphazardly and perfunctorily developed, and the prose itself is "fumbling and insensitive."

I began my recent rereading of the book aware, of course, of the book's classic status, of my bewildered reaction to it as a boy, and of Knight's furious essay. I came away agreeing with Knight's attack, and yet finding virtues in this odd book nonetheless.

The storyline of *The World of Null-A* goes something like this:

In the twenty-first century there appears a mutant superman named Gilbert Gosseyn, whose brain has an extra sector that gives him the power of teleportation, among other things. Gosseyn produces three or more clones of himself (the word "clone" wasn't used in the sense of duplicates in 1945, but that's what van Vogt means) and hides them in various places as potential replacements or continuations of himself. About the same time, Null-A, a "non-Aristotelian" method of multi-valued thinking, is developed, and, because its use produces superior mental capacities, its practitioners come to dominate the Earth and establish a utopian world government. In addition, Venus, which is habitable by humans, is colonized from Earth by elite candidates chosen by a super-computer, the Games Machine.

The novel takes place in the year 2560, when what van Vogt calls a "gang" of unscrupulous men, some of them agents of a galactic empire, plot to overthrow Null-A, destroy the Games Machine, and conquer both Venus and Earth. As it opens the clone we come to know as Gosseyn I, a Games Machine candidate, discovers that everything he believes about his own identity is false (the paranoid theme that Philip K. Dick would later exploit so successfully). Then he wanders into the

clutches of the gang, and several times either escapes them or is inexplicably released by them before he is finally killed, whereupon the Gosseyn II clone awakens on Venus and continues the story. (The fate of Gosseyn III remains unclear.) Eventually, after many an escape and recapture, Gosseyn II and a couple of allies thwart the gangsters and Null-A is saved.

It sounds like pretty silly stuff. It is pretty silly stuff.

Damon Knight documents all the places where the plot contradicts itself, usually because Gosseyns I and II fail to comprehend what's right under their noses. He points out horrendous stylistic blemishes. ("Gosseyn's intestinal fortitude strove to climb into his throat, and settled into position again only reluctantly as the acceleration ended.") He shows how feebly imagined van Vogt's twenty-sixth century is. (In the twenty-sixth century, one still gets phone numbers from the yellow pages of a printed directory.) He cites nonsense science. Thus, by citing chapter and verse, he shows how misconceived and poorly written this supposedly great science fiction novel is. I could add many more examples of my own. (Gosseyn is given a device made of "Electron steel, the metal used for atomic energy." Reference is made to characters, and even a Galactic League, that have not previously been introduced. And so on.)

Van Vogt actually read Knight's acidulous essay, took it in remarkably good spirit (in a replying essay he shrewdly predicted that Knight would go on to a great career writing science fiction himself) and when he prepared the novel for its 1948 book publication he adopted many of the Knight strictures, extensively rewriting the story to strengthen both its logic and its prose. Whole sections were junked, especially in the Venus section of Part II. Great sequences of plot were restructured in the later chapters. Many, though not all, of the passages of dreadful prose singled out by Knight were rewritten. And for a 1970 reissue

van Vogt revised it again, not as drastically: for example, by then it was known that Venus is uninhabitable by humans, so the third version noted that in the twenty-first century it had been terraformed (by a notably wacky technique involving the hauling of ice meteorites to Venus from Jupiter and letting them melt) so that Earthmen could settle there. Et cetera, myriads of changes over the years.

And here is where I part company with Damon Knight's famous attack. I think that every time van Vogt revised the book in the interest of making it make more sense, the worse it got. The original 1945 magazine version of *The World of Null-A* is, I think, far superior to its two successors of 1948 and 1970.

This is my reasoning:

The first version of the book seems to me to be a goofy masterpiece with no internal logic of plot or character, a kind of hallucinatory fever-dream that carries the reader along on a pleasant tide of bafflement from one Gosseyn to the next. It is a novel best read, as John Campbell did, in one bleary-eyed all-night sitting, without trying to make sense of anything. Taken in that headlong way, it offers a kind of surreal pleasure. The original text has a crazy magic about it, particularly in the discarded Venus section. Any revision in the direction of greater rationality, any attempt to clarify the unclarifiable, dilutes the effect of this fundamentally irrational story. The two revised editions, having had so much of the nonsense combed out of them, are not only still silly, but dull. The first text is the one to read.

Alas, those 1945 magazines that I read in the wrong order are now quite rare. But I see now that I did the right thing back in 1949 by reading the text out of linear sequence. Scrambled that way, it has a strange beauty. The more van Vogt tried to straighten it out, the more ordinary it got.

I think Damon missed the point about the novel's nonsensicality. There's poetry in its very incoherence. No wonder it's been hailed as a classic all these years. ○



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Brian Stableford is continuing his project to translate the classics of French scientific romance and adventure SF into English for Black Coat Press. Recent titles include Albert Robida's *The Clock of the Centuries* and *The Adventures of Saturnin Farandoul*, Gaston de Pawlowski's *Journey to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*, and Henry de Graffigny and George Le Faure's mammoth cosmic tour *The Extraordinary Adventures of A Russian Scientist*. His latest story for us is the last in a series of tales about the galactic adventures of such-sixteenth century luminaries as Sir Walter Raleigh, Edwin De Vere, John Dee, and Francis Drake, which culminate in the ferocious onslaught of . . .

# THE GREAT ARMADA

Brian Stableford

## Preface

In *"The Plurality of Worlds"* (August 2006), set in 1572 in the reign of Queen Jane, Thomas Digges piloted an ether-ship designed by John Dee into orbit around the Earth. Digges' body was invaded by a tenuous "ethereal" life-form and the ship was captured by the insectile colonists of the moon. The ship's crew—including Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh, John Field, and Edward de Vere—was subsequently sent by hyperetheric transporter to the center of the galaxy for examination by the molluskan Great Fleshcores, rulers of a vast invertebrate empire. Digges was informed by a rogue endoskeletal robot, however, that the empire was unsteady, and that the discovery of humankind might be the turning point that would shatter its integrity.

In *"Doctor Muffet's Island"* (March 2007), set in 1577, Francis Drake, disappointed by the fact that he was generally thought to be mad because he insisted that the adventure of the ether-ship was real rather than illusory—as the other known survivors, Digges and Field, both claimed—hoped to discover new possessions for the English crown in the Pacific. He found that he had been preceded by an expedition whose members included the Paracelsian physician Thomas Muffet and Walter Raleigh, the latter strangely transformed after a lunar encounter with a spider. Like humans, Raleigh informed Drake, arachnids were misfits within the galactic empire, and had their own plans for the destiny of the newly complicated scheme of things.

In *"The Philosopher's Stone"* (July 2008), set in 1582, Edward Kelley, pursued by John Field's Church Militant on suspicion of sorcery, made his way to John Dee's house on the instructions of an "angel" that communicated with him by means of a

*black stone. Assisted in his progress by an extraterrestrial robot, but then betrayed by a false friend, Kelley was eventually captured by Field, along with Dee and Giordano Bruno. Kelley's "angel" then took a more active hand in his affairs, liberating him so that he and Dee might find a safe haven in which to construct a fleet of ether-ships, in the hope of repelling an impending invasion from the moon.*

*Now, in 1588 . . .*

# 1

Francis Bacon looked up from the manuscript he was studying. His brother was standing at the window that looked out toward the river, although there was little to be seen without; the fog had reduced the light of the nearest street-lantern to a mere yellow stain and blotted out all trace of moonlight. There were no inns or eating-houses closer than Newington Butts, so there would have been few passers-by even if the evening had been clear.

"There it is again!" Anthony said, excitedly. "It swooped close to the window, as if it wanted to look in. It was a firebird!"

"There's no such thing as a firebird," Francis told him, patiently. "It might be a raven strayed from the tower."

"The queen's ravens don't scavenge the grounds of Lambeth Palace," Anthony retorted. "Too much competition." He meant the black-clad officers of the Church Militant, who were abundant between Foxe's lair and St. Mary's Church. Stephen Batman had received a living as rector of the parish, although the post was a sinecure. The house in which Francis was now going through the remnants of Batman's papers was a small tenancy in the shadow of the palace.

"There's no need to be ill at ease," Francis told his brother. "My association with John Dee and Tom Digges hasn't turned Field against me. He's a milder man than he once was, and he values my friendship for the news I can bring him from Wilton."

"When I'm ill at ease, Francis," Anthony said, "it's because my sixth sense gives me reason. This wasn't a good day to cross the river."

"You didn't have to accompany me," Francis reminded him. When he had been a child, he had been grateful for the fact that Anthony had cast himself in the role of protector, but once they were grown the affection had soon become tiresome, and now threatened to become intensely irritating. Although their duties in the service of the crown hardly allowed them to keep close company for more than a few days in a month, Anthony still felt obliged to pose as Francis' guardian when they were together. Francis was attending to personal business now—which was why he had to attend to it by night—but that only made his brother more wary of disaster than he usually was.

Most of Batman's books had already been taken to Cambridge to be integrated into the collection he had built at Corpus Christi, but the notes he had made while laboring on the updating of the great English encyclopedia seemed to Francis to be a monument to the old man's endeavor, well worth preserving if only they could be sensibly organized. If he did not make the effort himself, the best result that could be anticipated was that the papers would be crammed into half a dozen satchels and left in a cupboard to be devoured by greedy insects. Given that Dee, Drake, and a thousand others were working relentlessly to build a fleet of ether-ships in order to prevent the heritage of human civilization being wrecked by insects, it seemed to Francis that there was a point of principle at stake.

"It was a firebird," Anthony repeated, stubbornly. "Perhaps I'm the only human soul who can see it, just as Ned Kelley is the only one who can see and hear his angels, but I saw it. Something's afoot."

There was a sudden rapping on the door of the house, for which Anthony's forebodings might have served as a cue. Francis waited for Stephen Batman's old maid-of-all-work to find out who it was. The name she gave, when she appeared, was Christopher Marlowe.

Francis frowned. He went to the door himself, but when he recognized the playwright's voice he drew back the bolt, and opened it.

Marlowe was not alone. Before stepping across the threshold he introduced his companions as John Faust and Gawain Brook. Faust was a greybeard clad in black traveling-clothes, every inch a scholar. Brook was younger, probably no more than forty, but he was wearing a sword and had the air of a fighting man.

Francis took them to the study, where he gave them a second glance by candlelight, and felt a slight thrill of shock, although he could not be entirely certain that "Gawain Brook" was really the man he took him to be.

"I asked Master Marlowe to introduce me to you, Master Bacon," said Faust, in perfect English with no more than a slight Germanic rasp. "We arrived in England yesterday, with a companion who is enthusiastic to meet you: Rabbi Low of Prague. You will understand why he could not come himself."

Francis did understand. Queen Jane had lifted the proscription that excluded Jews from London some twenty years earlier, but there might still have been an element of risk in a Rabbi walking abroad within a stone's throw of the Archbishop's residence.

"You might have sent a letter to my home warning me of your impending arrival," Francis commented, "and might have found more suitable companions to escort you—no offense, Kit."

"None taken," Marlowe said. "Men of the theater are always regarded a trifle askance by true scholars." His tone was ironic.

Marlowe's companion was not so content. The glint of anger in his eyes was evident. "You can have no objection to me, Master Bacon," he said, softly. "We have never met."

"I saw you at court when I was a boy," Francis said, sure of his identification now that he had heard the man speak. "I also watched you climb aboard John Dee's ether-ship sixteen years ago. The occasion made a deep impression on me."

The expressions that crossed the other man's face were swift, but revealing. The first was pride, at having been remembered over such a distance of time; the second was annoyance.

"You're a wanted man, Lord Oxford," Francis observed, "outlawed by Church and State alike."

"Aye," retorted the man that Francis had recognized as Edward de Vere, "on the basis of inaccurate suspicions, I'm not here on behalf of the Pope or Elizabeth Tudor, but a different master."

Francis returned his attention to the greybeard. "There was a pamphlet produced in Germany last year," he said, uneasily, "telling a fanciful story about a scholar named Faust who died some fifty years ago."

"My namesake's reputation has preceded me for some little time," Faust replied, with a thin smile. "The Rabbi has a similar problem. We apologize for approaching you in this unorthodox manner, but the matter is urgent and delicate. It concerns Dee's project—and its guide."

Francis glanced at de Vere again, wondering what he might have reported to his current employers. Marlowe was only a common eavesdropper, but de Vere might have given them a first-hand account of the ether-ship's adventure—an account that he had never seen fit to give to John Dee or the queen's Privy Council.

"Be careful, Francis!" said the ever-wary Anthony. "If these men want you to serve as their ambassador, they should not have come gliding through the fog like shadows."

"You can hardly hold the fog against us, Anthony," Marlowe put in. "Nor can we hold back the night. You are right to count your brother precious, and I assure you that he is just as precious to us."

Francis raised a hand to bid his brother be silent. "You've come from Prague, you say," he murmured, still addressing himself to Faust. "Did the Emperor send you?"

"No," said Faust. "We're not agents of any foreign state. If you will take the small risk of coming with us now you will be amply recompensed. What Dee, Drake, and Digges are doing in preparation for war is necessary and heroic, but no momentary exchange of fire can settle the tortured matter of Selenite xenophobia. We know why the colonists of the moon are so anxious to recruit humankind to their version of True Civilization, and we know that there are allies who might help us if we can apprise them of our plight and establish means by which they might intervene. We hope to achieve that, but this is a delicate matter, to which the Church of Rome and your Church Militant are equally sensitive. The slanders leveled against my name and Judah Low's are stupid, but men have been burned for less. The Rabbi is aboard a ship, moored a few miles downstream. We have the tide with us now as well as the current. We can be there in less than an hour."

Francis tried to calculate how far a skiff might travel along the Thames in an hour, given the advantage of the tide as well as the river's flow: beyond Rotherhithe, for sure, and further than the Isle of Dogs. He had only the vaguest notion of what lay between there and the marshes. The journey back would not be as easy, though, and he had no idea how long it would take to hear whatever Faust and Judah Low were eager to tell him.

"This is foolish, Francis," his brother said. "Don't go."

"I have to, Anthony," Francis said. "This might be important."

## 2

As they put on their cloaks, Anthony whispered in Francis' ear: "This Low is the man who consorts with a golem, is he not?"

"So they say," Francis told him, choosing to make a jest of it. "And this Faust is the scholar who was made immortal by the demon Mephistopheles some fifty years ago. The wonder is that you did not see a whole flock of firebirds tonight, or hear a choir of banshees screaming."

Anthony scowled, but said no more. He set his hand on the hilt of his sword as the party left the house, but Francis knew that the gesture was mere bravado.

Once they were swallowed up by the fog, Francis began to feel a little guilty at having mocked Anthony's anxieties. The thick vapor did indeed have an eerie quality about it, especially when it was infected by the sulfurous yellow light of the tallow street-lanterns. It seemed malevolent in itself, as well as extending an obvious hospitality to all manner of skullduggery. The embankment was little more than a hundred paces away, though, and there was a boat waiting for them at the nearest quay—a launch with two oarsmen, easily capable of accommodating five passengers. It had a lantern in the prow and another in the stern, the latter veiled in red translucent cloth. Faust gave orders to the oarsmen in German. The rowers were obviously skilled mariners, used to dealing with waters far rougher than the Thames. Once they caught the current they soon built up a healthy speed.

The ceaseless train of horse-drawn barges continued on either side of the river in spite of the fog, audibly if not visibly, but the Thames was wide and there was plenty of navigation space available. The darkness was so intense as to seem almost tangible. The fog added a slight seasoning to the odor of ordure that always afflicted the

surface of the river, but Francis' normally sensitive nostrils had long grown used to ignoring that kind of stink, in all its subtle varieties.

Faust sat beside Francis; Marlowe and Anthony were in front of them, facing the two oarsmen. De Vere stood in the prow, posing as lookout, although it was doubtful that he would be able to give much warning if another vessel did emerge from the fog.

"Why have you come to England, Master Faust?" Francis asked the German scholar. "If you and the Rabbi wanted to exchange information with Dee, you could have done so by letter—encrypted, if necessary."

"We would have benefited from entering into regular correspondence with Dee twenty years ago," Faust replied, "but we did not know that at the time. Besides, the Empire has not had a moment's peace since Luther nailed up the thirty-nine articles; we are, it seems, an innately combative species. That is what alarmed the Senenites, I suppose, and led them to a heretical Protest against their own Empire. They too are Reformers at heart—they want to invade our world in order to save our souls."

Faust shivered, and drew his cloak more tightly about him. "How did you come to hire de Vere?" he asked, bluntly. "He has the reputation of being as dangerous a man to have on your side as to be pitted against you."

"We have no reason to doubt his loyalty," Faust replied. "He has been very useful to us in the past."

Capacious as the boat was, de Vere heard his name spoken. He came back toward the stern. "Will you stand lookout for a while, Master Faust?" he said. "Your senses are keener than mine, in spite of your years."

The German scholar got up meekly, and went to stand in the bow, allowing de Vere to take his seat.

"The man you remember is no more, Master Bacon," de Vere murmured. "I admit that I attached myself to the ether-ship's crew purely in order to win favor with the queen, in the days when her lovers reaped rich rewards of every sort, but the experience wrought as great a change in me as it did in my companions. The change was not as obviously consequential as the ones that afflicted Digges, Field, and Raleigh, but it was profound nevertheless. Tell me, Master Bacon, when you were at Cambridge, were you invited to join any *societies*?" He put sufficient emphasis on the final word for Francis to take his meaning.

"Three of them," Francis confirmed, truthfully. "I refused the invitations."

"Very commendable," de Vere muttered. "I was not so scrupulous, during my brief sojourn at Oxford. When I did not graduate, I thought the society had washed its hands of me, but I found out differently the day before the ether-ship blasted off. When my parachute came down, I landed badly—not merely because I broke my ankles but because I came down in the marshes, among folk who live in mortal fear of the queen's revenue men. They brought me a surgeon, but he was the society's man; I had no opportunity to send word to Dee or the court. Since then . . . well, Master Bacon, an oath is an oath, and I'm a man of honor."

Faust clambered back over the bench where Anthony and Marlowe were sitting in silence. "My old eyes are not as keen as your compliment implied, I fear," he said. "You were right to be suspicious of the invitation you received, Master Bacon, but there really is a secret body of knowledge that has been handed down from time immemorial, and there were very good reasons for keeping it secret, which still apply. John Dee turned down an invitation too, many years ago, but none was ever issued to Leonard Digges or his son. Errors of judgment are inevitable."

"I am bound by other oaths," Francis said. "I can't promise to keep anything you tell me from the queen or parliament, nor from John Dee. Nor will I betray any secret of theirs to your *society*."

"I understand that," Faust said. "It's up to us to lead the way in honesty; the situation is desperate, and our old restraints have become inconvenient."

"Like the fog," Francis muttered, looking around.

"The fog is more likely to protect us than lead us to harm," Faust replied. "We don't know exactly what resources our enemies have, but we know that they're working under the same spur of urgency."

"Are you taking us into danger, then?" The question came from Anthony.

"You're already in danger," growled de Vere. "The whole world is in peril."

Marlowe called out then: a questioning cry, which received an almost immediate reply. "Well judged, Kit," de Vere said. As the oarsmen changed direction, though, he turned swiftly to Francis and said, "Tell me, Master Bacon—have you ever clasped the hand of the man of bronze?"

Francis knew that he was referring to a man who sometimes kept company with Edward Kelley, though not frequently enough to deserve the superstitious judgment, noised about by some, that he was the wizard's familiar spirit. Bacon had always supposed that the nickname derived by way of Classical wordplay from the fact that he called himself Talos, although he was generally believed to be a Zingari rather than a Greek. "No," he said, in reply to the question. "I haven't."

De Vere reached out and took Francis' arm in order to guide his hand to the rope ladder he would have to climb in order to reach the deck of the launch's parent vessel. "That's a pity," he said.

"Why?" Francis asked, as he moved past the Earl to place his foot on the ladder's bottom rung, glad to find that it did not seem quite as unsteady as he had feared.

"Because it means that there are secrets in Dee's camp from which you've been excluded," de Vere told him, "and it might have given you a certain mental armor if you had."

### 3

Francis was compelled to give his entire attention to the business of making himself safe on the ship's deck before he could spare any further thought for de Vere's dark hints. The vessel had lanterns fore and aft, like the launch, and at least two more attached to her masts, but their muted light did not allow Francis to make a proper judgment of her quality. She appeared to be a slender two-masted merchant, some sixty feet from stem to stern. Her sails were furled and she lay very quietly at anchor, moored to a wooden dock that seemed utterly silent and lifeless. The name branded on the balustrade of the bridge was *Himmel*. There was a man at the wheel, and an officer beside him who must have been the vessel's master, but the fog hid their faces and the captain made no move to greet his new guest.

Francis helped Anthony over the bulwark, and his brother stood close beside him while they waited for de Vere, Marlowe, and Faust to follow them. Faust spoke briefly to the captain and the helmsman in German, then led Francis and Anthony down below, to what was presumably the chart-room. There was a round table in the middle, at which two men were seated. Both stood up as the newcomers arrived.

Because the lantern on the table had not been placed in the center, it illuminated one of the waiting men much more brightly than the other. He was tall and dark, and his beard was jet black, even though the lines in his face made him seem older than Faust; he wore a black hat, from which ringlets of hair depended over his temples. He met Francis' gaze immediately, and bowed to him. The other, who was dressed in a monastic habit, kept his face modestly in shadow, but he also made a slight bow before sitting down again.



"I'm Judah Low, Master Bacon," the first man said, remaining on his feet and inclining his head again as Anthony moved to his brother's side. "Thank you for coming."

"I'm honored to meet you, sirs," Francis said. "This is my brother, Anthony."

"Perhaps you'd like to show Master Bacon's companion around the ship, Lord Oxford," the Rabbi suggested, diplomatically, as de Vere stepped into the room in his turn. Anthony made no objection to the dismissal, although he took care to cast a significant glance around the room before leaving meekly with de Vere. Faust came in as they left. When the door was closed, Low indicated that Francis should sit down, then followed his example. Faust took a place at the table too. Francis and Low were facing one another directly, with the mysterious monk to Low's right and Faust to his left.

"You will inevitably be wary of us," the Rabbi said, without further ado, "so I shall begin by summarizing what we know. John Dee and Thomas Digges are constructing a fleet of ether-ships at Wilton, financed by gold made by Edward Kelley with the aid of the philosopher's stone, with which they hope to defend the Earth against the Selenite Armada. The fleet is armed with weapons whose design has been furnished by an ethereal, which names itself Aristocles. Despite having such men as Philip Sidney and Francis Drake at his disposal, Dee is not optimistic that the Armada can be prevented from landing at least some of its vessels safely and establishing nests of soldier ants, which have been alchemically redesigned to operate in the atmospheric and affinitive conditions that pertain at the Earth's surface. Dee has recently been in communication with Thomas Muffet, who believes that he has made considerable progress in the alchemical techniques taught to him by Walter Raleigh's Arachnid associates, even though the Spider Matriarchs were killed during the Tahitian revolt. Raleigh and his remaining Adapted Men are willing to serve as a land army tracking down and assaulting Selenite nests, wherever they might be established on the Earth's surface. Muffet and his daughter hope to mount a defense of a different sort, equipping individual humans with the means to resist the metamorphoses that the Selenites intend to force upon their bodies and minds."

"It seems," Francis said, "that you are better informed in some respects than I am."

"Dee has good reasons for discretion," Low observed. "The Royal College of Physicians still harbors resentment against Muffet, and John Foxe is likely to regard his schemes with instinctive horror, considering them diabolically inspired. Dee must be anxious to preserve his *détente* with the Church, at least until the fleet is launched."

*And I am known to be on friendly terms with John Field,* Francis thought. *It is a relationship that has proved useful to Dee, and should not have earned me his distrust.* Aloud, he said: "I must reserve my judgment on that."

Low nodded his head. His dark eyebrows shielded his eyes, but Francis saw him dart a glance at his companion, as if seeking reassurance that he had permission to proceed. Faust had not uttered a word; it seemed that he too was in the habit of deferring to the enigmatic monk.

"We are also informed that the queen has denied you permission to fly with the fleet," Low said.

"I'm a scholar," Francis said, "and Her Majesty deems that I shall be far more use to her and England with my feet on the ground, no matter what the fleet can achieve." That was, indeed, the reason that the queen had given him, although it was whispered in the court that she had become besotted with him, in a quasi-maternal fashion, and was too fearful of losing him to allow him a part in such a dangerous enterprise. In 1572, when the first ether-ship had been launched, the gentlemen of the court had been very eager to impress her by risking their lives, but she was sixteen years older now, and the temper of life at court had changed completely. Queen Jane represented herself now as the mother of the nation, and made a show of regarding all her courtiers as her children rather than potential lovers—but she still played fa-



vorites, in her fashion, and was still prepared to indulge her whims to the narrow extent that protocol and politics permitted.

"Do you regret that, Master Bacon?" Low asked, his voice surprisingly smooth and mellow.

"Anthony regrets it more, I think," Francis replied. "The queen forbade us both, out of some strange sense of fairness. He's more a man of action than I am. Still, I would be a coward, would I not, if I were to take comfort from the fact that other men will fight a fearsome battle on my behalf, while I sit safely home?"

"Do you believe Francis Drake's claim that the crew of Dee's original ether-ship traveled much further than the moon—to the very heart of the Milky Way?"

"Certainly," he said. "Tom Digges believes it now, although he needed the evidence of Edward Kelley's angel to convince him, and Dee is similarly convinced. Does de Vere believe it?"

"Yes, he does," Low replied. "He had his doubts, for a while, but they have been conclusively settled. If you were offered an opportunity to do as he did—to travel to the heart of the galaxy, within sight of the blazing rim of the Black Pit—would you take it, even if there were dire risks involved?"

"Are you offering me such an opportunity?" Francis asked, warily.

"Yes," said the Rabbi, bluntly.

"How great are the risks?" Francis asked, for want of anything better to say.

"Only slightly greater, we suspect, than the risk of remaining here on Earth—but a trifle more urgent. On the other hand, the potential reward of making the journey might be far greater than any that could accrue from remaining Earthbound all your life."

"You cannot expect me to make a decision until I know far more," Francis said. "You need to explain exactly what you are proposing to do, and why. I'm not a coward—but I'm not a fool, either."

Instead of answering that, Judah Low turned to look at his companion and master. The monk leaned forward, as if by way of response, putting his face into the direct glare of the lantern for the first time. He was an old man, seemingly much older than either Low or Faust, although he did not seem weak in limb or gaze. His hair and beard were white and his eyes were also very pale, almost colorless. His features seemed benevolent; he radiated a peculiar impression of kindness and gentleness.

"I am prepared to grant you access to a great secret, Master Bacon," the monk said, solemnly. "I ask nothing of you in return, but I must warn you that it will change you irredeemably."

Francis was tempted to shrug his shoulders as a gesture of bravado, but he resisted the impulse. "It is my ambition to write a better encyclopedia than Stephen Batman's," he said, speaking slowly in order to give himself time to think, "which will cast down all the false idols that have confused the beliefs of men for far too long. My intention is to write a comprehensive account of what is genuinely known and proven to be true, and to expel the mythical therefrom. I will not take your arcane secrets on trust, but I am enthusiastic to listen to them."

The monk smiled, without a trace of irony in his generous expression. "Take my hand, then," he said, and reached out across the table.

The old man's fingers were long and slender, the skin very coarse and wrinkled. Francis could not help but remember what de Vere had said to him in guiding him to the rope-ladder, and hesitated; when he reached out his own hand it was merely to invite the other to seize it, rather than taking the initiative himself.

The monk did seize it—but not palm to palm, as in a conventional handshake. He grasped Francis' wrist; and Francis gripped his reflexively in return.

Then Francis looked the old man full in the face, and saw what he really was.

The creature in monkish drab was not a churchman at all, nor even human, but was something dark and grey, soft and slightly moist. It had a face, of sorts, but its eyes were not human eyes and its mouth was not a human mouth. It was very slightly reminiscent of a snail's face, although the stalks supporting its eyes were very short.

Francis realized that Judah Low really was attended by a golem: a humanoid creature formed out of flesh with the texture of clay. Francis was seized by a sudden conviction that Faust really was the scholar who had won his dubious reputation at the beginning of the century—but his eyes remained locked on the golem's. It was not Judah Low who was the golem's master, he realized, but the other way around. It was the golem that had brought him here, and it was the golem that was offering to send him into the heart of the True Civilization, to the Imperial Throne of the Great Fleshcores. He guessed then what the golem really was.

"How long have you been on Earth?" Francis asked, when the other let go of his wrist and the clasp was broken. He was astonished by the coolness of his own voice, and the pertinence of his question.

"Almost twenty thousand years," the fleshcore-fragment replied, placidly resuming whatever glamour it was that gave him the appearance of a monkish scholar. "I believed that I had long grown accustomed to the hectic pace of life here, but I was unready for its rapid acceleration in the last half-century. There may still be time, even so, for me to summon help that might save the world."

4

"I presume," Francis said to the golem, "that you've employed many guises and many names in the past."

"My kind has a casual attitude to names," the golem told him. "The one I use nowadays is Christian Rosenkreutz; before that I was Johann Heidenberg, otherwise known as Trithemius."

Francis remembered the latter name from his studies. "Trithemius was abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Sponheim a hundred years ago," he said, attempting to shore up his reputation for cleverness. "Dee helped the queen's diplomatic service set up systems of secret communication based on the principles outlined in his—your—*Steganographia*. The first humanist history is also credited to you—Stephen Batman knew it well. You taught Cornelius Agrippa, and Paracelsus too."

"The problem with able pupils," said the creature wearing the appearance of an old man, with a wistful sigh, "is that many of them come to believe that they have learned everything they need to know in order to make further progress by themselves—but that is also their greatest virtue."

"And who were you before you were Trithemius?" Francis asked, curiously.

"It is only very recently that I have been forced to compromise with the documentary enthusiasm of chroniclers and lawmakers by inventing dates of birth and death," the golem told him. "Most of the names foisted upon me have been easily committed to oblivion, although some survive stubbornly in legend."

"Plato?" Francis guessed. "Pythagoras? Zoroaster? Prometheus?"

"There was no single Pythagoras, Zoroaster or Prometheus," the golem told him. "There were six of us once, although I have been the sole survivor for several centuries. My kind does not have a determinate lifespan, but is not immune to the vicissitudes of time and chance. Plato was a mortal like yourself. Do you recall his family name, by the way?"

This time, Francis was not caught at a loss. "The same as Kelley's angel informant," he said. "Aristocles. Drake says that he remembers Tom Digges using the

name during the adventure of the ether-ship. Tom agrees, although he confesses that his memory of what happened then is still very hazy."

"De Vere's is clearer," the golem told him, "and he remembers that Aristocles was the name Digges gave to their insect guide, not the ethereal that invaded his body and made a voice inside his mind."

Francis frowned. "Drake told me that the insect that accompanied them from the moon to the heart of the Milky Way was destroyed by a humanoid machine. Does de Vere remember that?"

"Quite clearly," the golem told him. "What he does not know is how the insect came to be given the name. He thinks it unlikely to have been Digges' choice."

"Tom is a highly educated man, after his fashion," Francis said, "but de Vere might be right; he's not given to obscure Classical allusions. If the angel—the ethereal—is using the name now, it was presumably the one who chose it, although why it should have claimed the name for itself after first attributing it to another I cannot tell." Tired of seeming trivia, he hurried to change the subject, adding: "When you said that there was no single Prometheus, you weren't denying that you and your kin had played a Promethean role in human affairs. Is all of human progress—moral, intellectual, and technological—the result of some experiment mounted by the Great Fleshcores twenty thousand years ago?"

"We have been helpful, on occasion," the golem said. "How could we not, given that we are moral beings, respectful of God's Creation? We were sent as observers, but we were not forbidden to intervene in the evolution of human consciousness. I and my kin certainly made some slight contribution to human intellectual progress—perhaps more than we knew, but less than we sometimes hoped. We have never been great originators of technology, though, for we are not much given to manipulation, even though the hands we pretend to have are fully capable of use. As for moral progress . . . you and I might disagree as to what that ought to comprise, even though we would both disagree with the Selenites. Even after twenty thousand years of study, I am not certain whether human beings are capable of the kind of moral progress that the True Civilization has embraced, or what significance that incapacity might have, if it were to be insuperable. That, I assume, is one of the reasons why the matter of endoskeletal intelligence has recently become a bone of contention within the True Civilization—although I am at a loss to know why it should concern the ethereals at all, since their ancients consider the transactions of material life to be vulgar and inconsequential. The interest of rogue machines like the one that calls itself Talos is understandable; to them, natural endoskeletal intelligence must seem to be a proof of sorts that they are not the abominations that their makers claim. The mere existence of the human race presumably seems to be of quasi-messianic significance to at least some of the mad machines."

"That's why de Vere asked me if I had ever clasped hands with Talos," Francis said, not framing the guess as a question. "He assumed that I would know, if I had done so, that he really is a man of metal, not the human he seems to be to innocent eyes. What other magic tricks can you play?"

"Enough to sustain my disguises, but fewer than is sometimes reputed. All wizards grow in the popular estimation once they have passed on to fresher fields or gone to their graves. I have only been in Britain once before, and even then spent far more time in Less Britain than this island, but I gave rise to more legends than than reason could ever have anticipated, despite that all my efforts came to nothing."

Francis guessed his meaning readily enough. "You were Merlin," he said. "I was never sure, myself, whether King Arthur ever existed, let alone the wizard attributed to his court by Norman romance—but here we are, seated at a round table, and Edward de Vere has rechristened himself Gawain. The man has a sense of humor, whatever his faults."

"Perhaps Malory's muddled epic will give you some insight into my limitations," the golem said. "Arthur's reign was unsustainable, in the end, and the grail of transubstantiation unattainable at the time. Muffet might yet be able to attain the same end by other means."

"Kelley's angel has a great deal to say about transfiguration," Francis observed, "but transubstantiation is the Roman Church's word. Are you taking about the same thing?"

"What I mean by the word I borrowed from your religious doctrine," the golem said, "is the process by which the union of different species is achieved in the making of Fleshcores. I believe that the ethereals mean something analogous, but on a much larger scale. They have a very different idea of the essential constitution of life and its relationship to the many dimensions making up the universe—they perceive nine, but there are probably more. I am certainly oversimplifying their ideas, and probably distorting them, but I believe they see the ether itself as a kind of bodily fluid, and matter as a kind of skin. To them, the perceptible universe is an individual of sorts, capable of metamorphoses akin to those that exoskeletal species routinely undergo, and those that exoskeletal intelligences learn to contrive as they evolve toward incorporation into fleshcores."

That was too much to take in at one gulp, even for the cleverest man in England. Francis thought it best to seek clarification. "Your own magic doesn't extend to the transformation of human flesh," he deduced. "That is why you call the end that you sought as Merlin the *grail*, explicitly linking it to the Church's legendry of transubstantiation—but you think that Raleigh's Spider Matriarchs had some such magic, and that Muffet might have mastered its elements before his guides were killed."

"It is not magic," the golem said, placidly, "and I do not trust the Arachnids, as Raleigh seems to do. Were they to become powerful on Earth, they might be no better from the human viewpoint than the Selenites, and perhaps worse. The Selenites certainly fear that prospect, on their own behalf. Forgive me, Master Bacon, for cutting your questions short, for I'm sure that you have many more to ask, but time is pressing. I have long had a means of returning home, which I have taken too much for granted. I fear that it can no longer be used without risk, and there may be danger even in exposing its existence, but it is also a means by which help might be summoned and sent to thwart the Selenite invasion. I would like to take some companions with me, for examination by and consultation with the Great Fleshcores. I want to take at least one who is entirely innocent of my direct influence, or any other extraterrestrial interference. I therefore invite you to come with me."

The sudden change of tack, and the conclusion to which it had raced, took Francis aback. He became suddenly conscious of the waves lapping at the side of the ship, and the gentle rocking of the vessel in the water, which reminded him that he was not on solid ground, and that the tide in the Thames estuary changed direction at the whim of the sun and moon. He looked at Faust, who smiled faintly, sympathizing with the shock that he had suffered.

"Can I be sure that I would be able to return?" Francis wanted to know.

"I can offer no guarantees, but I have only been away from home for twenty thousand years. I cannot believe that the Great Fleshcores will have changed, and I am certain that they would not detain you against your will. If I am successful in my entreaties, they will be eager to send you home, in order to serve as an ambassador to the Selenites' opponents."

"Does de Vere support Drake's claim that Thomas Digges extracted a promise from the fleshcore to which he talked, that humankind would be let alone?" Francis asked.

"De Vere has told us what was said to the fleshcore," the golem answered, "and he confirms that the fleshcore seemed to consent—but he cannot be sure that Thomas Digges is the one who did the asking."

"You think it was Aristocles? The angel, that is, not the insect."

"It is possible that the ethereal inhabiting Digges' body was controlling his speech. We are not convinced that it was the same ethereal as the one that is now supplying Kelley with information. Whatever the truth of the matter, though, it seems that the Great Fleshcores did make a promise—and I am certain that they will do everything they can to keep it."

"As yet," Francis pointed out, "they have done nothing."

"That is a mystery," the golem agreed. "The Selenites have obviously cut off their own hyperetheric link to the Core, but there must also have been a more widespread and more general disruption of intragalactic communications, else the Great Fleshcores would surely have been able to do *something*. I am sorry, Master Bacon, but I must press you for an answer. The timing of the enterprise needs to be precise, and the other companions I hope to take should be arriving momentarily."

Francis bit his lip, wishing that he had more time to reflect. "What other companions?" he asked.

"Walter Raleigh and Patience Muffet," the golem replied. "Rabbi Low and Doctor Faust will also come with me; if you agree, that will make up a party of six. It will be a great adventure, and might secure the independent future of the human race, God willing."

Francis was still not ready to take the plunge. "Do you have any firm proof of God's existence?" he asked, "or are you required to accept His existence as a matter of faith, as we are?"

"We are unable to doubt the existence of God," was the golem's slightly evasive but steadfastly patient reply, "but we cannot pretend to understand His nature, or know His purpose; nor do we believe that the ethereals know any more, although their ancients pretend otherwise. Whether or not you and I need faith to sustain our belief in God, we both need trust to sustain our conviction that He has our interests at heart."

"What of the Devil?" Francis asked, unable to resist the temptation. "Are you able to doubt his existence?"

"There is no Devil," the golem replied. "But that is not to say that there is no evil, and the ultimate source of that evil is as puzzling to us as it is to you."

"But there is war in Heaven," Francis said, softly. "Kelley says so."

"The ethereals do seem to be at odds with one another," was all that the golem would concede, "but I find it exceedingly difficult to think that any of their kind might be rebels against the Divine Will. The fact that humans find it a relatively easy thing to believe is one of the most remarkable things about them. I must press you for an answer: will you come?"

"Tell me how you intend to travel," Francis said, aware that it was the last question he had any right to ask.

"I have a means to improvise a hyperetheric link," the golem told him. "The expedition has to be done in two stages, because the interstellar transmission apparatus had to be hidden in another dimension, anchored to a point in orbit around the Earth. The problem of alignment imposes stern practical difficulties, which prevent the establishment of such apparatus on the surface of a world like this one. Folding the apparatus into the material manifold is as simple as the folding process required for transmission, but we will have to make the initial ascent to the platform via an ultraetheric canal. The Selenites might try to attack the platform once it has materialized, even though they would be forced to operate an inconveniently long way from their base, but I do not believe that they can prevent our departure; de Vere, Marlowe, and two of Raleigh's Adapted Men should be able to defend the platform successfully against any insects that can reach it by ether-ship or etheric flight. You must decide now: will you come?"

Francis had made his decision, which seemed to him to be inevitable. "Of course I will," he said. "How could I do otherwise?"

The seeming old man relaxed momentarily, but got to his feet almost immediately. "Thank you," he said. "I must go now, to look for Raleigh and Patience Muffet, and to give the captain his orders."

Francis felt stunned. The consciousness slowly caught up with him that he had just brought his familiar life to a full stop, and embarked upon another. Anthony would be extremely annoyed with him.

Heidenberg and Faust were already heading for the chart-room door, but Judah Low remained sitting, apparently ready to assist Francis with any more questions he might have.

"What would have happened if I hadn't accepted your invitation?" Francis asked.

"The launch would have taken you upriver when the tide turned, at least as far as the port of London. You'd have had a fine tale to tell Queen Jane and John Dee—but they might not have believed you, without the kind of proof that my master gave you."

That was true enough, Francis thought. Even the queen, who loved him like a favorite son, might hesitate to believe that he had left Lambeth by night to visit the legendary Merlin, who was also Trithemius, Prometheus, and a giant snail. Francis Drake would believe him, he felt sure—but he was not so certain of Dee, given that he had no proofs to offer the mathematician of the sort that Aristocles had given to Edward Kelley, let alone the sort that Talos had presumably provided. None of that mattered now, though.

"Will you allow Anthony to go with de Vere and Marlowe?" he asked. "He's a brave man, if there's any fighting to be done—and he certainly won't want to return to London without me."

"He may come as far as the platform, if he so desires," the Rabbi said. "He will be very welcome—especially if there is fighting to be done, although we hope that no such eventuality will arise. Should you not ask him first, though?"

*Oh, he'll say yes, Francis thought. He'll leave the Earth behind and lay his life on the line for me, poor lad—it has ever been his fate in life.* He did not say that to the Rabbi, though.

Judah Low took his silence as an invitation to say more. "Faust and I have been preparing for this all our lives," he said, with a curious mixture of pride and restrained excitement, "which have been, as you now know, a little longer than the usual human span."

"I too might have benefited from a little more opportunity to prepare," Francis said, amiably, "but I'm a scholar, and I dare say that is preparation enough for any kind of educational journey." It was sheer bravado, but he was proud of himself for being capable even of that.

The door to the chart-room burst open again as he finished, and Anthony rushed in, holding aloft an arm whose wrist was gripped by a gigantic parrot with red and blue plumage.

"I told you that I saw a firebird!" he exclaimed.

"He is actually a macaw," said the young woman who came in behind Anthony, "and his name is Agamemnon."

5

**T**he *Himmel* put down anchor again some distance east of Tilbury, but Francis did not think that she had traveled as far as Sheerness. He could not judge the length of the journey very well because he had spent the time below decks, furiously scribbling



letters of apology to the queen and everyone else to whom he owed an obligation. By the time his conscience was satisfied there were eight envelopes separately addressed and sealed, containing twelve letters in all; he passed the bundle to the vessel's captain, having extracted a solemn oath that they would be sent back to London with all possible expedition.

The execution of this duty had given Francis no time to acquaint himself with Patience Muffet or to reacquaint himself with the individual who claimed to be Walter Raleigh. The latter bore no resemblance to the flamboyant courtier Francis had seen as a boy, although he claimed to remember both the brothers, having been on friendly terms with their father. Nicholas Bacon had not had many friends at court, by virtue of his rumored Elizabethan sympathies, but Francis was prepared to believe that Raleigh had been one; he was not so sure, though, that the dark half-human creature who now laid claim to Raleigh's memory could really be reckoned the same man.

The metamorphosis that Raleigh had undergone, as a result of Arachnid alchemy, had not robbed him of all semblance of humanity, but Francis certainly could not reckon him an alluring advertisement for the science in question. He had been an uncommonly handsome man, but now was very ugly; his skin was dark, coarse, and hairy, and the shape of his face had been transformed into an inverted isosceles triangle, somewhat reminiscent of that of a broad-browed goat—or an artist's impression of a demon, modeled on some such animal. On the other hand, Raleigh had no giant spiders with him at present to sow further fear and panic among those who beheld him, and the members of his small contingent of Adapted Men were mere echoes of his own form. Now that he had glimpsed the true appearance of Rabbi Low's golem, Francis felt that he had learned a significant lesson in visual tolerance.

Patience Muffet, by contrast, seemed entirely human in appearance—not unusually pretty, perhaps, although her face was innocent of any pock-marks, but certainly personable. It seemed that Arachnid alchemy had not transformed her physically at all, but there was something slightly disturbing about her intense gaze, and the manner in which she communicated with her winged spy. The bird had soon deserted Anthony's wrist in favor of her shoulder, and was forever muttering incomprehensibly into her ear. Francis had felt offended when he first saw the bird, imagining that it had been sent to Lambeth to spy on him, but he had realized soon enough that it must actually have been sent to spy on Faust and his companions. Patience was obviously wary of the secret society to which these ill-assorted companions belonged, although she too could not have hesitated long before accepting the golem's invitation.

"I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting your father," Francis said, when he finally found an opportunity to introduce himself properly, "but I have heard great things about him."

"You have only heard a fraction of the truth, Master Bacon," she assured him, with a stiff manner that had more anxiety in it than politeness. "Now that he has come home, your reputation as the cleverest man in England will be gravely imperiled."

"I am not so exceedingly fond of it as to be determined to defend it," he assured her, refusing to take offense. "I shall be delighted to learn what he has to teach me about the alchemy of the flesh. Ever since Francis Drake introduced me to the concept of evolution, I have been fascinated by it."

"Perhaps I shall find time to acquaint you with some of his ideas," she said, but then broke off the conversation and went in search of her stalwart Raleigh.

The place where they eventually came ashore again was a kind of island in the marsh—or a promontory, at least—with a little wood trailing along its low-set ridge. The wood was dense enough to ensure that no crewmen on any passing boat, no matter how close it came to land, would realize that some busy enterprise had formed a clearing in its center, and had established some kind of machine there. Half a dozen



of the thirty laborers who had performed this task were similar in appearance to Raleigh, with dark, leathery skins, but the rest were Europeans, including a handful of Englishmen. Francis assumed that they were all members of the society that de Vere had mentioned, who had been abruptly summoned to fulfill their oaths of allegiance. Those who had not made their way to Kent overland must have sailed from the Continent with the Order's Superiors.

The parts of the machine had certainly not been fashioned in any local forge, and must have been shipped from the Netherlands in the *Himmel's* hold. They were not the only things that the golem's companions had brought with them; the first things that Francis was taken to see when he and Anthony arrived at the construction site were the suits that they would wear on their expedition.

The bodies of the suits were made of rubber, and seemed very loose-fitting at first glance, but what caught Francis' attention more immediately was the array of near-spherical helmets, apparently fabricated out of black glass. From without they seemed opaque, but when one of them was fitted over his head—carefully, for the hole intended for the neck was hardly broad enough to accommodate a generous nose—he saw that it was, in fact, translucent.

"I thought that Tom Digges had proved that the ether is breathable," Anthony objected.

"He did," said de Vere. "He proved that the body can function well enough for a while in ether rather than air, much as it can function between meals—but ether does not support life in the same fashion as air, and a man breathing ether will fall into a torpor eventually, or begin to suffer delusions. Those eventualities are best avoided—but the helmets and suits are also intended to protect us against overly intense light and the possibility of encountering noxious air."

"We do not know exactly what we shall find when we set off on the second leg of our journey," Francis deduced, articulating the conclusion for Anthony's benefit. "We shall certainly reach the surface of another world, but we do not know what difficulties might face us before we can get safely inside it, into the bosom of its fleshcore." He remembered, too, that Thomas Digges had *breathed in* the ethereal that had hitched a ride in his body and brain, and guessed that the golem might be anxious to protect his companions against that eventuality as well. The ethereals were evidently something of a mystery to the Fleshcores, and the golem obviously did not trust them.

After inspecting the suits, Francis and Anthony were taken to another canvas-covered store, where they were shown a number of weapons. In form they resembled arquebuses, closely enough to have been disguised as such, but they were lighter, and their barrels were not amenable to cramming with powder and shot.

"They fire rays of energetic light," de Vere told them. "They're all but harmless when fired in air, although they're capable of blinding a man if cleverly aimed, but in ether they're deadlier, especially to insectile wings and compound eyes. Drake's ships will be fitted with artillery of a similar sort, though much more powerful—but his men will wear swords too, just as we shall. If fighting comes to close quarters, there's nothing to match a good blade—except, I'm told, insect jaws and insect stings, which can easily inflict mortal wounds if not adequately parried, by virtue of the poisons they contain. Have you trained with that sword, Master Bacon, or do you wear it just for show?" This time, he was addressing Anthony rather than Francis.

"We have both been schooled," Anthony claimed. "Our master may not have been as skilled as Arthur Golding, but he had seen military service in the Netherlands and was no mere fencer."

De Vere's eyebrow lifted slightly, suggestive of his skepticism, but his reply was scrupulously polite. "In that case, Master Bacon, Kit and I will be glad to have you at our side, as well as Raleigh's dark folk—although we're told that they're very fear-

some fighting men, and I can readily believe it. Faust's master assures us that a battle is highly unlikely, and that we might reckon ourselves unfortunate if we encounter anything more than a patrol of glorified night-flying moths, but it's always as well to be prepared."

Francis divined that de Vere was trying to lift his own spirits as well as Anthony's; Francis supposed that any attack they might have to withstand would be launched from an ether-ship, against whose hull the ray-guns would probably be as impotent as blades.

"How powerful are Drake's guns, Francis?" Anthony asked, a trifle wistfully. He had always envied Tom Digges far more for his work as an artillerist and military engineer than for his exploits as an astronomer and mathematician.

De Vere answered in Francis' stead. "Powerful enough to blast holes in the ships of the Selenite Armada," he said. "That will not put an immediate end to the Selenites inside—they can fly in the ether—but will make it extremely difficult for the ships to withstand the last phase of their journey, through the Earth's atmosphere."

Anthony, still trying to match his interlocutor in the appearance of casual courage, continued the interrogation. "How long will we need to stay on the platform high above the Earth?"

"That I don't know," de Vere replied. "In the first instance, Master Rosenkreutz will only require a matter of minutes to align the transmitter. We shall, of course, make our initial ascent at a propitious moment. After that . . . well, it might be hours, or days, before a messenger returns to give us further information. Be reassured, though, that our greatest difficulty will probably be boredom."

Anthony seemed reassured by this, so Francis did not want to question it. He had thought of a hundred more questions by now that he wanted to put to the golem, but none that Edward de Vere would be able to answer reliably. Faust and Low were as busy as the golem himself in making the final arrangements for the use of the ultra-etheric canal, whose activation would bring the hyperetheric transmitter out of its other-dimensional hidey-hole within seconds, and then transport a company of bold pioneers to the platform on which it stood. He was not required to lend a hand to any heavy work himself, but he was unable to exploit the waiting time as he would have wished, in recovering more information. Patience Muffet and Walter Raleigh seemed preoccupied with their own concerns, so Francis had little to do but look out over the estuary, from which the fog had now lifted completely enough to allow a clear sight of the sailing vessels making use of the incoming tide.

The sky was cloudy, and the water exceedingly grey. The marsh, Francis judged, must have a rather bleak aspect even at its best—but for a man about to quit the Earth, the scene could hardly help seeming uncommonly hospitable and homely. One of Edward Kelley's favorite sayings was that it was the Earth entire, rather than his magical red powder, that was the true philosopher's stone; Francis took that to mean that it was the evolutionary transformations wrought at the Earth's surface by the passage of millions of years that constituted the real wonder and the real miracle at the heart of these turbulent times. In the vast empire of the Great Fleshcores, it was said, there was—or had been, until John Dee's ether-ship had provoked a disturbance whose extent and durability was inestimable—a calm, a fixity, and a certainty of purpose very different from the politics of Earthly nations and the perpetual squabbles of human individuals. There was something enviable about that prospect, Francis admitted, but there was also something to envy in relentless competition and the urge to rapid progress, no matter what the cost in uncertainty might be. If Thomas Muffet really were on the threshold of discoveries that might give human beings the power to accelerate and direct their evolution, what might his quarrelsome species make of itself? Something very different, undoubtedly, from what the

Selenites wanted to make of it, in order to accommodate humankind to their notion of eternally static utopia.

In the end, Francis lost himself sufficiently in this reverie that Patience Muffet had to come to fetch him, telling him that he must put on his suit immediately, because the "node" at which the orbital platform would unfold was approaching its ideal position.

"Could your father not be here to bid you farewell?" Francis asked, as they walked side by side. He felt rather awkward, for he had little idea how to talk to young women, and knew that his experience in dealing with Queen Jane was far from pertinent.

"He has relationships to build and old scores to settle," Patience told him, as they went into the storage-tent. "He intends to be the spearhead of a Paracelsian revolution in England and Europe. That is what he insists on calling it, although his medicines have nothing in common with Paracelsus' silly nostrums."

"It will be easier to persuade the needy of its merit if he calls it Paracelsian instead of an Arachnid revolution," Francis observed.

She smiled slightly at that. "You're right," she conceded—but had to stop talking then, in order to get into her suit, which was even more loose-fitting about her slender frame than any of the others. Rabbi Low and the golem were the stoutest members of the entire company, but even they did not test the elasticity of the fabric unduly.

Once Francis had his helmet on, a release of air from a satchel on his back inflated the suit slightly. That disconcerted him, but he quickly accustomed himself to the sensation. Now that the company had sealed their suits it was difficult to recognize anyone; he could see out well enough, but he could hardly see into the other black glass shells at all. He could not tell which ones of his ten companions were the five who would undertake the second phase of the journey with him and which would be left behind to man the platform, but he supposed that they would sort themselves out soon enough, once the work of aligning the mysterious hyperetheric projector actually began.

He took his position randomly, huddled on the narrow dais of the first machine with everyone else, not knowing where Anthony was or with whom he was rubbing shoulders. There was no ceremony, and he did not even see a lever activated to send the company on its way. One moment he was in Kent, and the next . . .

6

The next moment, however, did not seem to follow the preceding one as immediately as it might have done, time itself having been wrenched out of true as the ultraetheric canal snatched him up. For a moment, everything disappeared, or was turned inside-out, including Francis' body and his mind. A sudden odor of burning onions surged out of his memory, unbidden and completely unexpected.

When time resumed its course again, the wrench he felt left him feeling extremely dizzy and nauseous. Strong hands moved him out of the way, although there was something very strange about the fashion in which his feet were dragged. He was given something to grip before he was abandoned, and then felt able to open his eyes. His vertigo and nausea returned in full force when he found himself looking down from the edge of a platform, to whose balustrade he was clinging.

Oddly enough, he did not have any sense of being high up. He had been to the tops of Welsh mountains and had peered down sheer cliffs, and had then been very acutely aware of the distance he might plummet if he lost his balance, but there was nothing now connecting him to the planet below him, and he felt that he weighed nothing at all, although he knew that he was not beyond the range of the Earth's affinity. He

felt light enough, at any rate, to imagine that he might float away, drifting in the subtle currents of the ether. It was easier to imagine that than to accommodate the idea that he might tumble from where he now was to the surface of that gigantic ball—which was certainly beneath his feet, given the direction of his unfolded body, but did not really seem to be *below* him in any truly meaningful sense of the word.

Francis had seen many terrestrial globes fashioned out of carefully curved pieces of cloth mounted on a wicker frame, as well as many celestial globes depicting the relative positions of the distant stars, but he was slightly surprised to discover that the Earth bore as little resemblance to a geographical globe as the sky did to a celestial one. It was not so much the coloring of the land and sea as the extent of the clouds, which obscured vast tracts of continent and ocean alike, and made it exceedingly hard to identify the outlines of the familiar world-map.

He had unthinkingly expected the sun to be above his head, but it was not; it was very close to the rim of the Earth and moving closer all the while, about to set—or to be eclipsed, according to terminology that seemed to have loosened considerably. He had also expected the moon to be full, although he had had no particular reason to suppose that it would be; in fact, it was positioned in such a way that three-quarters of its face was sunlit and the remainder in shadow.

The moon's face was no larger than it was when seen from the surface, but his eyes scanned it anyway, as if by reflex, searching for some slight evidence of activity or the presence of the Great Armada that was being patiently assembled there in order to attack the Earth. There was no such evidence visible, although the floating disk seemed so very light that it was easy to think of it as a hollow crust filled with a vast hive of ants and beetles, caterpillars and centipedes.

There was a good deal of activity going on behind him, and he was jostled a little, but the platform of the orbital station was considerably larger than the stage of the Earthbound machine, and Francis did not feel that he was in danger of being thrust over the balustrade. He discovered that the soles of his feet were stuck to the surface of the platform in such a way that they could easily be slid along but were not so easy to lift clear in order to assume a normal gait. *Magnetism*, he thought, wonderingly. That was another of John Dee's old obsessions, investigated on behalf of the queen's navy and the Muscovy Company, in order to perfect its navigational uses.

There were people already busy about the strange devices that occupied the four corners of the inner compound where the focal point of the transmitter was, but Francis did not bother to turn round in order to study exactly what they were doing, or to what. He was not the only one standing back, and he felt that he was wise to do so rather than get in the way of workmen who had tasks to complete.

He tilted his head back and turned to his left, in order to avoid the muted light of the sun, whose rays were reddening now by virtue of their passage through the Earth's atmospheric envelope. He looked at the stars of the Milky Way, which lay across the black sky like a great stain—but not at all like a stream of spilled milk. For every star visible from the surface of Earth, he guessed, there must be hundreds now visible to his unsupported eye, and might be thousands were he not wearing the black helmet, but they seemed oddly frail and tiny, quite disconnected from one another in spite of their profusion. There was nothing misty about the Milky Way now, except for a few strange patches; the greater part of its extent was very obviously a field of distinct points of light, lost in an infinite sea of dark. Had the void theorists not been so thoroughly defeated by the plenarists, Francis could almost have imagined that the space outside the Earth's kindly layer of air really was empty.

He was about to turn his attention to the moon again when everything changed. He supposed, in the first instant, that he must simply have been looking in the wrong direction to see the attackers approaching—but those whose appointed task it

was to take up defensive positions and mount vigil had no time to react either. If anyone had shouted a warning he probably would not have heard it, for the ether was much less efficient at transmitting sound than light, but it seemed more likely that there was simply no opportunity for anyone to do so. Between the instant when the space beyond the Earth's affinity seemed empty enough almost to be a void, and the instant when it seemed entirely full of fluttering wings, there seemed to be no lapse of time at all.

Francis assumed that the imitation arquebuses were fired, although he saw no beams of light spring from their muzzles. He assumed, too, that the rays struck targets, for he could not imagine how they could possibly miss, but the shots seemed to have no effect at all on the swarm that was now seething around them. He thought of it as *seething* because he could hear no sound, although he was fully prepared to believe that it might be buzzing, too. He had no weapon at all, so his first impulse was to drop to his knees and cover his head as best he could with his arms, but that was not easy with his soles stuck to the platform, and so he squatted instead, in a remarkably ungainly position, with his knees jutting out. Nor did he cover his head for more than a moment, for the contact of fluttering wings made him lash out reflexively with his hands and forearms, trying to shove the marauders away.

Francis could not tell, at first, how large the members of the attacking swarm might be. They were at least ten times as large as honey-bees, but he could not narrow that estimate any further when he tried to estimate their average wingspan and the length of their bodies. They filled the ether so densely that it was almost impossible to imagine that their furiously beating wings could avoid colliding with one another and sending them all fluttering out of control—and yet, it seemed, they did avoid collisions, and retained all their awful certainty of purpose.

Swords were undoubtedly being used, though not with any need for a fencer's art. They were presumably being used as flails, brandished above the sentries' heads and twirled in such a way as to carve out circles in space. Doubtless, too, the blades must be doing sterling work, scything through wings and abdomens by the dozen or the hundred—but without any conspicuous impact on the density of the swarm.

Francis became aware, almost to his surprise, that he was no longer waving his arms above his head, but was clawing instead at his chest and thighs, trying to dislodge fliers that had lighted there and were clinging fast. They could not adhere to the glass of his helmet, it seemed, but they could gain purchase enough on the rubber of his suit to cling and bite—and bite they did.

At first, their jaws were unable to penetrate his suit, whose rubber yielded and stretched without being torn—but as the creatures persisted, he felt the fabric penetrated in half a dozen places and felt the clothing he was wearing within give way as claw-like entities raked and stabbed his flesh. He felt pricks of burning pain, strangely muted by shock, and was conscious that blood was beginning to flow—first from his left arm, then the right, and then from his breast, no more than a handspan from his heart.

*Why, he thought, in stupefaction, they're killing me! This is not supposed to be happening. We were supposed to be safe, at least until we got to the heart of the universe.*

He felt an arm tugging his own then, and another pair of hands grappling with the insects that were clinging to his suit. He knew that it must be Anthony, reckless of his own danger and fearful for his brother's life. Francis knew, too, that the brave fellow's efforts must be futile—and so they would have been, had help not arrived.

The insects were entirely visible and tangible, difficult to discern only because of their sheer profusion. They were an exceedingly solid and material threat, horrific in its simple brutality. Whatever came to blow away the insect swarm, by contrast, was visible and tangible only in its effects, and not in itself. It was more like a storm-



wind than an entity, but it was a wind with intelligence and precision, which blew exactly where it willed. It tore the clinging insects away from Francis' suit, and from Anthony's suit as well; but it plucked them away with an amazing delicacy, which inflicted hardly any force at all on Francis' desperate arms and twisted body.

*But it's too late!* Francis mourned—and would have screamed, had he not feared to witness the utter impotence of his voice. *My suit is breached, and my skin too! I'm poisoned, no matter what punishment God has seen fit to inflict on my persecutors!*

He knew, though, that it was not God who was punishing the plague of stinging flies that had descended upon the orbital platform. He guessed readily enough that it was one or more ethereals, fully capable of denying the insects the power of ethereal flight. Kelley's Aristocles was probably among them; at any rate, they certainly had no love for murderous insects. They desired to protect humans from harm—but they had come too late! They had arrived, in all probability, no more than a few seconds after the attack had begun, but they had not come in time to save the humans' lives.

Or had they?

As Francis' thoughts ran on, he realized that he was not dead yet, nor even in terrible pain. He felt light-headed, to be sure, but he had felt light in every possible literal and metaphorical respect since he had first discovered himself weightless, and he did not think that he was becoming delirious, although he could not be entirely sure.

He felt himself grabbed again, and assumed that Anthony was still by his side, ready to lend him succor—but there were two black-clad figures with him now, who were dragging him along, forcing his near-weightless feet to slide along the platform with increasing velocity, as the initial grip of friction yielded to momentum. He had no idea who was dragging him, but he could guess why they were doing it. In spite of everything, the golem had aligned the hyperetheric projector.

In spite of everything the mission to the heart of the universe was still on course. If only he could remain alive, and find good air or honest ether at the far point of his extradimensional trajectory, he might yet see what he had intended to see, and might even contrive to return with intelligence of it.

*God have mercy, he thought. Faust and Low are doubtless worthier than I am, having prepared for this moment all their lives, and Patience Muffet still qualifies as one of those children to whom You try to extend tenderness, while I am merely a humble scholar who has dared to doubt Your goodness, but have mercy nevertheless.*

The stars were still shining as he formulated this prayer, and the storm-wind was still blowing all around him without buffeting him at all—but the stars suddenly ceased shining, and the storm-wind seemed suddenly to be *within* him, and one with him, as he was turned inside out. The sensation of inversion, and of compression of his three dimensions into a mere thread, was unpleasant, but he did not lose consciousness even for a moment, and he even contrived to keep track and account of his consciousness.

As soon as the train of thought reached its terminus, he was delivered into confusion, not quite knowing where he was, or who, or even how—but he still had a precious inkling, albeit a terribly faint one, of *why*.

## 7

When Francis recovered full possession of himself he was already awake, with his eyes open, and he was immediately able to sit up. He had already been staring at the sky for an immeasurable length of time, and he continued to do so, but he was now able to take better stock of what he was looking at.

The zenith was occupied by a black circle, about twice the size of the moon as seen

from Earth. Around it, the greater part of the sky was filled by a vast coruscating wheel, which actually did seem to be turning, although its color and dazzle were so confused that the impression might have been an illusion. There were strange dark patches within the wheel, though, that were definitely moving, in various trajectories curved in a direction contrary to the wheel's apparent movement. There were thousands of them, and they gave the impression of being in flight, although they had no definite shapes. They might, Francis thought, have been a vast flock of gigantic bats, whose outlines were confused by the light dancing behind and around them—or fragments of the central well of darkness detaching themselves in sequence and finding a fragile freedom in the world of light.

He knew that he would not have been able to contemplate the sight at all had it not been for the black glass in his helmet, so he assumed at first, when he tried to redirect his attention to the ground and look at his immediate surroundings, that his eyes had been overstrained, and that the devastation he beheld was a trick of injured perception. A few seconds passed before he realized that the ruination was real, and terrible.

There had been something like a city where he stood, but there was only blackened debris now. The harsh light of the celestial wheel was brighter by far than any Earthly daylight, but the surface of the world was all but colorless; everything that had not been burned had been blackened by smoke. It was not merely buildings that had collapsed but other structures; the horizon was littered with twisted masses of metal that must once have been proud masts and pylons. Closer to his own position, the ground was pitted by craters and fissures. It was impossible to judge what most of the various heaps of rubble might have been, before they had been stamped flat by some brutal force, but it was possible to pick out various kinds of broken body-parts, most of them insectile but some eerily similar to human limbs and torsos. They were not flesh-fragments, though, but parts of smashed-up machines made in the form of insects or humanoids, replete with sinews of metal wire and arcane clock-work.

The surfaces of the worlds at the heart of the galaxy, Francis Drake had told him, were no longer the province of living flesh; they were places where machines worked tirelessly. Here, the arena of machine labor had been very thoroughly devastated by some kind of cosmic disaster, natural or artificial. That did not necessarily mean, however, that the living components of the world—the fleshcore and its myriad attendants—had been destroyed, or even damaged. Francis continued looking around, peering through black glass at the blacker landscape.

At first, he thought that there was nothing moving at all, but then he felt a flash of panic as he realized that there was something very close to him, whose movement had been camouflaged at first by the fact that it was almost entirely black itself, moving against a similar background. He might not have seen it at all but for a glint of light reflected from something smooth and rounded.

His panic faded as abruptly as it had arisen when he realized that the round object was a helmet similar to his own. His eyes became slightly better adjusted then, and he was able to pick out the whole figure. The other bent down to him—he was still sitting—and the other helmet made contact with his own. That enabled him to hear a voice—Patience Muffet's voice—saying: "Who are you?" Her tone was anxious, but full of courage and determination.

"Francis Bacon," he told her.

"How badly are you injured?"

That was a good question, he thought. He moved his hands over his body. His suit had certainly been torn and penetrated in half a dozen places, but the rents seemed to have sealed themselves. The sore points on his body where he had been stabbed



or grazed responded to his probing fingers, but the pain was dull. No bones seemed to be broken. He appeared to be breathing normally.

"Very slightly," he informed her, "unless I've been injected with some slow-acting poison. I'm not even in pain, although I know that I was stung and slashed several times over. You?"

"The same," she said.

"What about the others?" He moved his head slightly as he spoke, careful not to lose the contact, hopeful that he might now be able to pick out other moving figures against the dark backcloth.

"I've only found one," she told him, her voice betraying a new emotion. "It's Low. He's dead."

"Then where . . . ?"

"I don't know," she said. "When the insects attacked, he and Walter tried to shield me—to protect me. They drew me to the departure-point, the focal plane of the transmitter. One was still holding me tightly when the transmission was activated—I had assumed that it was Walter, but apparently it was not."

"I was dragged too," Francis told her. "One of the two was Anthony, but I could not identify the other. The others must be here, must they not? It's simply that we can't see them while they're lying still. We have to find them. The golem . . ."

"We were betrayed," Patience told him, cutting him off preemptorily. "Faust. It had to be Faust."

"Why . . . ?" Francis began—but she cut him off again.

"The insects came from the hyperetheric apparatus," she told him. "The Selenites had a fix on the platform before the slug could get the apparatus aligned. They would have captured it for sure if the ethereals hadn't intervened. Perhaps they took it anyway. If this really is our intended destination, there must have been treason here too. It's possible that the others are here, or very slightly displaced from here . . . but it's more probable that only three of us came through before the transmission was cut off. I suppose it's possible, too, that the slug has already returned, abandoning us here—but Walter would never have gone back without me." She paused, but hardly had time to draw breath before resuming: "We need to get underground, if we can. The air here is very thin and bad. We need to get to the fleshcore . . . if the fleshcore is still alive."

"Is that thing above us the Black Pit to which the golem referred?" Francis asked, feeling unable to imitate the young woman in referring to the fleshcore-fragment as a "slug."

"I presume so," she said. "The radiant matter swirling around it is falling into it, dissolving as it falls—but I didn't expect the Shadows. Nothing is supposed to be able to escape the Pit, so they cannot really be emerging from it, as they seem to be. They might be forming in the matter that is being torn apart, in which case they might be ethereals of some sort in the process of being born—the one that Kelley talks to describes itself as *nascent*, does it not? I don't know. We have to descend into the underworld, Master Bacon." The way she pronounced his name implied that she would rather have found one of her other companions—one more capable of judging the situation, and more adept at handling it.

Francis got to his feet, breaking contact briefly. By the time he tried to press his helmet to her again, though, she was already moving off. She paused just long enough to take his hand and say: "Come on." Then she set off, evidently expecting him to follow her meekly. He was in no position to challenge her assumption of authority, so that was what he did. He had no alternative thereafter but to try to answer his own questions while he stumbled along in her wake, not even knowing how she was conducting her search for a way into the interior of the devastated world.

They had been betrayed, she reckoned—by Faust, she suspected, although she had no evidence for that, and no way of knowing what kinds of spies might have been watching the golem's party for far longer than her faithful Agamemnon. In any case, the Selenites had been prepared in advance for the emergence of the hyperetheric link from its fold in space, and had been ready to seize it, perhaps for use as a staging-post in their impending invasion—in which case, the golem's attempt to go home had made things worse for Earth and humankind, not better. The fleshcore-fragment's scheme had gone badly awry—but so had the Selenites' scheme. One or more ethereals had come to their aid, perhaps having also been forewarned of the golem's plan.

Francis felt a slight pang of relief, by virtue of the fact he had been recruited to the expedition at the last moment precisely to avoid the possibility that he might give anything away in advance, accidentally or deliberately, and was thus liberated from Patience Muffet's suspicions. Anthony's "firebird" had, at least, assured her that he was harmless, although she was unable to deem him useful. She was still holding his hand, still drawing him forward, searching for something.

Francis drew breath, and was alarmed to find that he had some small difficulty in doing so. The air inside his suit seemed to be changing in its quality, as if its vital essence were being gradually drained, and it was taking on a foul odor. He had to force himself to resume his train of thought.

If this world really was their intended destination, he thought—and it was presumably not impossible that the golem had been unable to align the hyperetheric transmitter correctly—then it had suffered a holocaust far more terrible than anything the Selenites intended to afflict on Earth. If this had been done deliberately, who could have been responsible? There was a new war in "Heaven," according to Kelley—a war between the natives of the ether, Francis supposed—and warfare in the True Civilization too, where insects allied with the Selenites had rebelled, and where there might also have been a revolt of the machines. One of these wars, if they were not merely facets of the same war, had reduced the surface of this world to a burned-out wreck. Could that be anything to do with the shadowy forms in the wheel of light? Might they, in fact, be nascent ethereals?

He took another deep breath, and found it nauseating, but that only forced him to concentrate all the harder. What had happened here, and what did it portend with respect to his own fate, and that of the Earth? That question brought Francis back, at last, to the issue he had been unconsciously trying to escape: the fact that he was all but alone, unimaginably far from home, with the jaws of death gaping wide in anticipation of swallowing him. His heartbeat fluttered—but then Patience Muffet touched her helmet to his again, and said: "Here. I doubt that we can activate the trap-door, but if there's anyone within who can detect us, I think we can make our presence known."

He looked down, and was able to make out a circular metal plate set in the ground, some ten feet in diameter. It was blackened, like everything else, but seemed reassuringly intact. There were various structures set around it that had suffered far worse, but there were numerous plaques inscribed with unreadable symbols, and a number of buttons seemingly intended to be pressed. Patience was already busy pressing them at random.

Francis moved on to the plate. It could not be iron, because his soles did not stick to it; he was anchored there by weight alone, and did not feel significantly heavier or lighter than he had on Earth. When he stamped his foot the plate rang hollow, suggesting that it was indeed the entrance to a shaft. While Patience tested the periphery, therefore, Francis began to stamp his feet more forcefully and rhythmically, hoping that he might attract attention in the simplest way of all.

After ten minutes or so, they both sat down to rest. Francis felt that all the strength was draining out of him, and that the interior of his suit was becoming unbearable. The various wounds he had sustained before the transition were still remarkably painless, but he felt thoroughly miserable. He touched his helmet to the young woman's, in order to say: "Don't despair. God would not send us half way across his universe merely to let us perish."

"Even the slug would not do that," she told him. "It seems, though, that all good intentions might have been thwarted by the unexpected, God's included."

Francis had to take his helmet away in order to shake his head—but his head, oddly enough, refused to be shaken. He found himself standing up again, although his volition seemed quite uninvolved in the action. He felt himself move to one side; then his arm reached out, entirely of its own accord. He could not make out what it was that his fingers did, not because it was too dark for his eyes to see, but simply because his sight was so startled by the impossibility of what was happening. After thirty seconds or so, however, there was a grinding sound and the plate began to slide sideways into a slot in the surrounding wall.

Patience made contact just long enough to say: "How did you do that?"

Francis did not answer, not merely because he did not know but because he could not activate his vocal cords. At first, it seemed that they had gained nothing. Beneath the plate that had moved aside was another, seemingly not much different, although its surface was not blackened. It was a pale grey, insufficiently polished to gleam in the excessive light. Francis' hand took Patience Muffet's, as she had earlier taken his, and his legs led her on to the plate. She followed meekly, just as he had, although he could feel the mistrust and anxiety in her grip.

"Don't be afraid," he said, glad to be operating his own vocal cords—although he was quite incapable of following his own advice.

## 8

**T**he inner platform began to descend through a smooth-walled shaft, heading for the bowels of the world. The dwindling circle of light above their heads was eclipsed as the upper plate slid back into place again, leaving them in total darkness.

Patience contrived another contact and repeated: "How did you do that?"

Still able to formulate his own reply, Francis said: "I didn't. Something else took control of my body. Perhaps that was the response to our appeal for help. May we take our helmets off now, do you think?"

"Best not," she replied, seemingly unamazed by his denial of responsibility for his own actions. "If they can operate our limbs like those of marionettes they'll likely do that for us when it's safe." After a moment's silence, she said: "I feel lost without Agamemnon." It was the first time she had addressed him as if he were a friend rather than a stranger, and he took a certain comfort in her acceptance.

"The world is not dead, save for its surface," he said, as much for his own benefit as hers. "Its fleshcore is alive, and likely to be accompanied by many other creatures. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that we might still be able to return home, carrying a message to the golem."

"Yes," she said. "But what shall we find at the transmitter if we do return?"

The platform on which they were descending came to a halt, and a crack of light opened in the wall behind them, widening into a doorway. It was the threshold of a circular chamber some twelve feet in diameter and ten high. There was a creature within, waiting for them; by virtue of its black and yellow coloring it resembled a wasp standing erect on the hindmost of its six limbs. The other four limbs were rest-

ing by its sides, and it was the antennae on its massive head that reached out to touch their helmets, inquiringly. It was not until the portal behind them had slid shut that Francis' arms reached up, without any instruction from him, to unscrew his helmet.

The air in the room seemed incredibly sweet at the first breath he took, although the second revealed odors that presumably emanated from the monstrous insect. The odors were subtly unsettling, but not actively unpleasant. Now the antennae palpated his face in the same inquiring manner. Francis bore the inspection stoically. By the time the antennae had withdrawn Patience Muffet had hesitantly unscrewed her own helmet to expose her face.

"What are you?" buzzed the wasp. It had not spoken in English, or any language that Francis could have pronounced, but he had understood the words anyway. How could he reply, though?

After a moment's hesitation, he said: "My name is Francis Bacon." At least, that was what he intended to say. The sounds that came out of his mouth were very different from the English syllables—but the insect appeared to understand them as easily as he had understood what the insect had said, for it was quick to reply, in a manner that gave no hint of astonishment. "How did you come here?" it said.

"By hyperetheric transmission from the nation of England on the world of Earth," Francis said. "The human species, to which we belong, has been under observation for a thousand of our generations by a creature that appears to be a fragment of a fleshcore. It was intended that he would come with us, and two other companions, but the only other we were able to locate after our arrival seemed to have died from injuries sustained when the transmitter was attacked by creatures of your sort. Our world is under threat of invasion from its moon, where there is a substantial colony of insects, rebels against the True Civilization. They are ready to launch a fleet of ether-ships, but we have a fleet of our own, which will attempt to defend it."

"What are you doing?" whispered Patience Muffet, in English. Francis was only able to shake his head slightly by way of reply.

"This is unexpected," the insect said. "We must go to the fleshcore."

It seemed that this room too was merely a cage encased in a circular shaft, for it began to sink as the first platform had, rapidly accelerating to such a speed that Francis felt as if he might float up into the air. The journey was not a long one, though, and the deceleration was sufficiently gradual not to be painful.

When the motion ceased, the walls were still smooth, but they were also soft and moist. Francis was instantly reminded of his brief vision of the golem's true self. They were, he realized, inside the fleshcore. This time, it was not antennae that reached out to investigate his face but improvised tentacles, and their palpation was more like a glutinous embrace. Had he been in control of his own body he would have been unable to resist the impulse to recoil, but he was not. Indeed, his mouth opened to let the questing slime come in, and he felt it flowing into his ears. He was terrified, but his body would not concede him any opportunity to express or reflect his terror. He reminded himself that Thomas Digges had endured a similar process, and come through it quite unscathed, although Digges had been unable to give him a description of the experience.

"Be calm," said a voice inside his head, apparently speaking in English. "No harm will come to you, and there is recompense."

In much the same way that he had earlier been permitted to see through the deception that normally concealed the golem's true nature from human eyes, he began to experience images in his mind, as if he were able to see into and through the living walls of the chamber into which he had descended. The imagery was very strange, but there was knowledge contained within it as well as mere appearance,

and he was able to grasp the gist of it. The fleshcore was attempting to show itself, or its own image of itself, in order to demonstrate its nature and its essential benevolence. He had neither the sensory apparatus nor the conceptual equipment to comprehend it fully, but he did glimpse something of the complexity of the fleshcore, and something of its exotic self-awareness.

The fleshcore, he understood, was both one individual and many, an entire society of disparate species united in a whole. On the basis of vague second-hand reports, he had previously imagined fleshcores to be analogous to gigantic brains, occupying planetary cores as if they were skulls, but he understood now that they were not mere thinking devices; they lived in their multifaceted flesh as human intelligences did, and did not feel in any way disembodied. He had also imagined, until now, that they might conceive of themselves as godlike entities, exercising near-omnipotent power from the thrones of the True Civilization, but that had been mistaken too.

The fleshcore did not conceive of itself by analogy with the queen of a formicary, and certainly not by means of the analogy that had led human observers to think of the reproductive individual in a hive as its "queen." It thought of itself as a natural consummation of a kind of creative process by which an initial capacity for reproduction gifted to primitive organisms too tiny to see had given rise by variation to millions upon millions of different and more complex organisms, which had refined many different kinds of sensory and alimentary apparatus and various patterns of growth and metamorphosis, feeding upon one another as well as the raw materials of air, earth, and water, while life burned within them like flickering flames, but also forming complex relationships of assistance and support.

In time, Francis understood, these relationships of assistance and support were themselves refined, in order that intelligence might guide eclectic selections of apparatus, combining them in more complex bodies capable of more complex metamorphoses. Employing the fundamental model of the hive, this process of intelligent selection and organization had eventually produced the True Civilization: a harmonious association of millions of different fleshy forms, which were no longer distinct species, but which still retained the potential for division and contention.

Francis understood, too—or, at least, imagined that he did—why certain kinds of organisms, including Arachnids, had been refused integration into the True Civilization, by virtue of an individualism too stubborn to be accommodated therein, and why intelligence in such species, in the very rare instances in which it arose, was considered dangerous. He understood, then, how it came about that endoskeletal intelligence—far rarer, it seemed, than Arachnid intelligence—posed an enigma to the True Civilization that was problematic in more than one way. He even gained a glimmer of understanding as to why the Selenites and their allies had decided to force a solution to the problem akin to Alexander's approach to the Gordian knot, even at the cost of rebelling against the ultimate arbiters of the cause they held so dear. He had an analogy of his own that he could bring to bear on that: John Field, the Puritan firebrand and master of the Church Militant, avid to force all souls into conformity with his own narrow conception of the necessities of their salvation, in frank defiance of the Church of Rome and all its echoes in the Church of England.

Francis lost track of time while this process of painstaking exploration and attempted enlightenment continued, gladly falling into a merciful trance. When the fleshcore withdrew its pseudopods, he felt as if he were waking up from a light doze, wondrously refreshed in more ways than one. He felt a good deal better than he had before the communion began; he was convinced that the injuries he had suffered, whose pain had only been muffled before, were now completely healed, and that his reason was clearer than it had ever been.

The wall reverted to being a mere wall for a few seconds, but then it began to stir



again. A humanoid figure formed, and stepped out of the fleshy mass. It was grey and smooth, like Francis' vision of the golem, but he was disconcerted to see that it was very similar to him, in its height and form. After a few more moments, it came to resemble him even more as it assumed the kind of glamour that had long concealed Judah Low's golem from ordinary human sight. Anyone who did not know Anthony might have assumed that this was Francis' brother.

"I apologize for that," the new golem said, in English. "This arrival was unexpected. We are doing everything possible to restore this planet's hyperetheric links, for our own benefit, and we shall be glad to focus our best attention on the link that you will require in order to return home. We shall recover your companion's body and make every attempt to resurrect him. We shall attempt to discover what happened to the others who were supposed to accompany you. We have begun to create suitable accommodation for you, but it will take a little time."

"What happened here?" Patience Muffet put in. "Have you been attacked?"

"Yes, we have," the golem said. "We are still at war here, although the first battle is over. An unlikely alliance has been contracted between insane machines, rebel insects, and other creatures. We do not know how the Shadows enter into the equation, but the fact that this world is so close to their cradle is obviously significant to our adversaries. The hyperetheric web has been utterly devastated in this region, but we are making progress in restoring links to the other heartworlds."

"What shall we call you?" Francis asked, slightly ashamed of intruding such a trivial question into such a portentous discussion, but feeling a need to have some better way of identifying his interlocutor than "the new golem" or "the fleshcore-fragment."

The creature hesitated momentarily, as if uncertain as to which name to choose, or how to make the selection. Eventually, it said: "Call me Solon."

Francis was curious to know why the creature had selected that particular name, but Patience Muffet evidently felt that he was wasting time. "Can the Earth still be defended?" she demanded. "Can you help us against the Selenite Armada, in spite of the Great Fleshcores being under attack themselves?"

Solon looked at her with what, had it really been human, would have been an expression of suspicion and puzzlement. "Do you imagine that we do not know what you are," it said, "and how the chain of events that resulted in the Selenite invasion plan was initiated?"

It was obvious to Francis that Patience had no idea what he meant. She looked at Solon, then at Francis, then back at Solon. It seemed Solon was equally uncertain, but that some sort of realization was slowly forming in the simulacrum's mind. Francis was surprised, after what had just happened, that the fleshcore's fragmentary offspring still had any margin of ignorance that would leave room for surprise, but there had to be some crucial item of information that the fleshcore had not recovered in the course of its intimate inspection, and was only now deducing.

In the meantime, Patience had jumped to a conclusion of her own. "I am entirely human," she told Solon—perhaps intending to impress the force of the assertion on Francis too. "Earth has not been invaded by Arachnids; the Arachnids that helped my father were not the instigators of this conflict, and are numbered among its victims."

Francis wondered whether some or all of these assertions might be false. In spite of the enlightenment that the fleshcore had attempted to share with him, there was evidently something about the situation of Earth and humankind that he and Patience did not know, although the fleshcore had assumed that they did.

"Is it possible," Solon asked, assuming a wondering tone himself as he turned to stare at the man he resembled so closely, "that the particular intelligence that calls itself Francis Bacon, and the element of his companion that is now speaking, do not know that they are aspects of composite minds?"



Francis' first impulse was to deny it, but he realized that he was not in any position to do so. Had not his limbs worked of their own accord in contriving a way down from the surface? Had he not spoken to the insect in a language that he did not know, and understood the insect when the insect had addressed him in that same language? How was it possible, in fact, that he had not realized himself that he was carrying a passenger? Had he not been witness to Thomas Digges' attempts to make sense of his own experience in the heart of the galaxy?

"Please don't be afraid, Francis," said a voice in his head. "I thought it best to be discreet, but I had no intention of deceiving you."

Francis could not help but be afraid—but he could not help remembering, too, that Thomas Digges had been offered soothing reassurances before being subjected to the cruelest deception of them all, in being made to believe for many years that he had only dreamed his experience.

"Aristocles," he said, silently. "You're the ethereal that calls itself Aristocles."

"In fact, I'm the other," the silent voice informed him. "Call me Lumen."

Not another, Francis took note, but *the* other. That must surely mean that there really had been two parasitic ethereals involved in the first ether-ship's adventure, not one. And now, it seemed there were two involved in this adventure, for Patience Muffet must be similarly afflicted.

"What's happening, Francis?" Patience asked, still apparently ignorant of her own condition.

"I do not know how far this tangle of treason extends, Miss Muffet," Francis said, "but I doubt that it was Faust who played us false, and we certainly have not reached the bottom of it yet. An ethereal used the rents that the insects inflicted on my suit and my flesh to infiltrate my body, as it did once before to Thomas Digges—and the same has been done to you. It was the ethereal that opened the way for our descent and talked to the giant wasp. The ethereals must have planned all along to join our expedition, and have contrived the insect attack to facilitate their invasion of our flesh."

"That's not the case, Francis," the voice in his head told him, urgently—although the urgency made no impact on Francis's conviction that he ought not to trust anything it said. "The insect attack was utterly unexpected. I did what I could to save your lives and protect the transmission. It is not in my interest that the individual you call the golem was left behind, and my most fervent prayer is that he succeeds in realigning the transmitter so that he can follow you here. I need to return by that route, just as you do. Ethereals are not subject to all the limitations of matter, but we cannot move through the ether faster than light, and our privileged access to the other dimensions is strictly limited."

"I understand the mistake I made, Francis," Solon put in, politely. "Our own state of symbiosis is not without its difficulties, and could not have been easily obtained at its inception. You will understand, I hope, when I say that it is your passengers rather than yourselves that are of primary interest to us. We have been trying hard to open efficient channels of communication with the Ethereals, as we have with the Shadows, but we have not succeeded—and that is why this unexpected arrival is so welcome. We are . . ."

That was all that Francis was able to hear before the space in which he stood was abruptly plunged into darkness, and he felt once again as if he were being turned inside out.

Again, he did not actually lose consciousness, but again, his consciousness was distorted in such a way as to make it direly difficult to take account of what was happening. He took it for granted that he was once again engaged in some form of extradimensional transit, but he had not the slightest idea how far he traveled, or in what direction, or even whether it made sense to raise such questions.

When he was once again capable of coherent sensation and linear thought, however, his first impression was that he must be burning in Hell.

The sensation of being burned alive did not last long, objectively speaking, although it was too long for Francis' liking. The following sensation, which was of being torn apart, was even shorter in duration, and almost comfortable by comparison.

When he was able to see again—in spite of being fairly certain that he had not opened his eyes—he perceived that he actually had, in some sense, been torn apart. There was an angel beside him, which had to be the entity that had invited him to call it "Lumen." It was now, as its chosen name had been devised to suggest, a creature made of light, formed vaguely in the image of a winged humanoid with a nimbus about its head. Francis knew that could not be its native form; what he was seeing, or dreaming, was a depiction improvised from the substance of his own imagination—but improvised by what? What force had snatched him from the entrails of the fleshcore, and where had it taken him? Was the impression of separation dependable, or was this simply one more trick on the part of the inscrutable Ethereal?

"This is not real," he said—aloud, although he was addressing himself, not the angel. This was a desert in which the two of them appeared to be standing. He knew that it was not real because of the pyramids. He had never seen the actual pyramids of Egypt, although he had read about them, but he knew that he could not possibly be in Egypt, and that Egypt could not possibly look like this. The sands were sparkling, although it was the dead of night, and there was no moon in the sky. There were too many stars, seemingly so close at hand that they might fall like rain at any moment. Whatever had improvised that sky, it was not a creature that had ever dwelt on Earth. By comparison, the angel was almost convincing, although its brilliant wings were colored, like those of a phantom parrot, and far too small to lift a creature the size of a human being from the ground. Lumen was reduced to the size of a human being now, if only in appearance.

"I suspect, Francis," the Ethereal said, in response to his comment, in a voice that certainly seemed to be composed of ordinary sound, "that this is far nearer to the heart of reality than you or I have ever been before. It is not truly material, to be sure—and your appearance, as I perceive it, is as shabby an imitation of a human being as I am of a human's notion of an angel—but it is most certainly *real*. If my guess is right, we have been captured by a Shadow."

"Why?" Francis asked.

"That is an excellent question. I wish I knew the answer. It might turn out to be a good thing—or it might not."

Francis tried to take some crumb of comfort from the mere possibility that it might be a good thing, although he was uncomfortably aware that he did not seem to have enjoyed overmuch good fortune since he had accepted the golem's invitation to step out of his familiar life into an adventure beyond the bounds of Earth. "What is a Shadow, exactly?" he asked, and was unable to resist a petulant impulse to add: "Or is that, too, beyond the limits of Ethereal wisdom?"

"I cannot be absolutely certain," Lumen replied, evenly, "but it must be some kind of being that exists in more dimensions than the four of which your senses are aware, probably in more dimensions than the nine of which I am normally aware. The universe is far more massive than is accountable in terms of the matter visible and tangible to human and fleshcore senses, and far more energetic than is account-

able in terms of Ethereal perceptions. Much of its constituency is hidden, and much of the force that sustains its structure and motion originates in that hidden sector—which is, we presume, the realm of God. Ethereals have long considered themselves intermediaries between God's realm and the material cosmos, by virtue of our extensions into other dimensions, but that is largely vanity—a delusion of the ancients, which nascents like myself and Aristocles do not share. The ancients have long been aware of other such extradimensional entities, but have grown used to considering them legendary. Plainly, they are not. If what we saw on the surface of that devastated world can be trusted, they are emerging by the thousand from the energetic flux of the Pit's accretion disk—but what their objective is, I have no idea. Nor, I presume, on the basis of what we have just learned, have the Fleshcores."

Francis was tempted to remark, bitterly, that the Ethereal seemed to have learned more than he had, and had taken some care to ensure that margin of advantage, but he knew that recriminations were futile. "Have they come to save the True Civilization, do you think," he asked his former passenger, "or to destroy it?"

"The Fleshcores will prefer the former hypothesis," Lumen told him, "but they are no more privy to the Divine Plan than we are. The ancients have been anticipating a gross transubstantiation for some time. Aristocles trusts their means of divination, but I am skeptical. Their claim to have lived through previous transubstantiations, undergoing radical metamorphosis while retaining their fundamental intelligence, is dubious in the extreme. Memory is transient and sometimes fickle, especially when extended over billions of Earthly years."

Francis was certain that his actual body, wherever it might be, could not move a muscle, but he commanded his delusional form to kneel down, by way of experiment—and it did. He took up a handful of sand, and let it trickle through his fingers. The sand was very fine, almost fluid, and it seemed slightly effervescent to the touch.

"How old are you?" he asked, when he looked up again at the false angel.

"Less than a million Earthly years," Lumen told him.

"Have you been interested in humankind as long as the Fleshcores that dispatched Low's golem?" Francis asked.

"No," Lumen replied. "Aristocles was the first to take an interest, but even that interest hardly dates back further than the advent of human history. It was not until I joined in that its dabbling became a game, and that was no more than five thousand years ago."

"A game," Francis repeated. "All this is a game to you?"

"Not any more," Lumen told him. "It ceased to be a game when John Dee's ether-ship set off a chain-reaction of responses, which appears to have brought us to this. The Fleshcore was wrong to deduce that Aristocles and I have deliberately precipitated this crisis. To the extent that we played a catalytic role, our intentions were neither malevolent nor mischievous. In any case, attributing blame will not help. The point is to discover why we have been brought here."

Francis looked up again, then, and saw the sphinx.

It had materialized out of nowhere, as if in response to Lumen's assertion. He had seen stone models of sphinxes, and had read their mythology, so it did not seem unfamiliar or menacing, in spite of its intimidating size. He felt quite confident in meeting its gaze, even though it must have measured fifty feet from nose to tail, and stood twelve feet high on all fours. Its face was handsome, more masculine than he had expected, although it had no beard.

"Do you have a riddle for me?" he asked.

"I do," said the sphinx, in a voice that seemed very soft, considering the size of the beast. "It is man."

Francis was not unduly surprised, although he had, inevitably, hoped that "man"

might be the answer rather than the riddle. "In that case," he replied, trying to seem casual as well as confident, "I have one for you; it is God."

"He is a riddle to us all, alas," the creature said, with an oddly wistful smile. "Even in the narrow confines of your own tiny world, you must understand that He made many worlds rather than one, of many different sorts, with many different populations."

"The plurality of worlds is the prevalent opinion now," Francis admitted, "but the horizons of our imagination were narrower not so very long ago. Nowadays, we accept that if God's creativity is as infinite as He is, he must have made an infinite number of worlds, filling the entire plenum of space, and that he might well have made creatures of every imaginable sort to occupy their surfaces and interstices."

"We do not limit Him to *imaginable* sorts," the sphinx told Francis. "You certainly should not, given that your native imagination is limited to so few dimensions, and so feeble even with respect to the dimensions you perceive. You are familiar, I suppose, with the assembly of species that calls itself the True Civilization?"

"I had just made its acquaintance for the first time when I received your invitation," Francis said, sarcastically. "I might have got to know it a little better had your summons not been so peremptory. I do know, though, that Thomas Digges once made a treaty with that civilization's Fleshcore rulers on behalf of humankind, which specified that humankind should be let alone. Alas, that treaty seems to have become worthless now."

"I know that," the sphinx told him. "That is why time is pressing. Whether God feels that pressure, we do not know, but we certainly feel it when events move uncomfortably swiftly. We are late upon the scene, and we regret that. We are not used to making haste. What I would like to know, Man, is what you think of the goal of the True Civilization: its manner of worship."

Francis was tempted to ask why the Shadow needed to know, but he too felt the pressure of time, and felt that he ought not to procrastinate even to the extent of demanding a clearer notion of exactly what he was being asked. The vision that the fleshcore had vouchsafed him was still fresh in his mind, ready to supply an answer. "At first," he said, "I liked the idea of all creatures living within the scope of a vast harmony, with each species evolving slowly toward what Digges and the Fleshcore both call *symbiosis*. Digges liked it too, while he was still convinced that his adventure had been a dream. Now I tend to agree with Francis Drake that the cost of that sort of harmony is too high a price to pay. Drake is not a bellicose man by any means, for all his skill in fighting, but he is a man who values his freedom. In his opinion, the kind of harmony represented by the insects he encountered in the Moon might be just about bearable, but only because it still retains the possibility of disagreement, competition, and conflict. An end to all predation inevitably seems an attractive goal to prey species, but even vegetables compete for light, water, and the space to grow. Without that competition, there would be no trees, no flowers, and no grasses. Change requires turmoil, and creativity requires change. John Dee, when he had properly absorbed the lessons that Digges and Drake brought back from the moon, declared that the finest of all God's creations is what Tom and the Fleshcore both call *evolution*: the capacity for creativity delegated to organisms themselves, to individuals and populations: the freedom to make themselves more than they presently are. Do you know what I mean by the parable of the talents, as found in our Earthly gospel?"

"Yes," said the sphinx, "I do."

"Then that is my answer to the riddle of man: his worth is to be measured not by what he has so far received, but what he might yet make of his potential. That is why we need to resist the invasion of insects that intends to adapt us to life in their ver-

sion of the True Civilization, and also why we should be wary of the temptations of the Arachnids, even though we need to develop our own alchemy of the flesh. It is also, I think, why we ought to be wary of the generosity of the Fleshcores, who are bound to see us as potential recruits to their own kind of symbiosis. I do not know, as yet, what the cost might be of accepting help from the Ethereals, and I am certainly grateful for the help we have received thus far—but I agree with all those who are intent on reminding me that they are not angels, and have their own interests at heart. I would say the same of Shadows, even though I realize that Lumen and I have no way home, and no prospect of continuing any kind of life at all, if you will not help us now."

"The cost of evolution," the sphinx reminded him, "is that individuals must die, that species must die, that worlds must die . . . and that entire universes must die."

"I do see that," Francis assured the creature. "Without death, the tendency toward stasis is irresistible. That fact is reflected in the different attitude of the Fleshcores and their insect associates, and the differences Lumen has sketched out between the ancients and the nascent of his own kind. It is certainly evident in humans, short-lived as we are, and I would hazard a guess that Shadows are not immune to it. I know that we talking now about more than the deaths of a few individuals, but I am still uncertain as to whether what is actually at stake is the death of a planet, the death of a galactic civilization, or the death of an entire universe?"

"Opinions differ," the sphinx told him, "but nothing can be ruled out. The conflict within the True Civilization, catalyzed by the quarrels instituted by its first confrontation with natural endoskeletal intelligence, might be a factor in the impending transubstantiation; there are some who believe it."

"What is involved in a transubstantiation?" Francis asked, adding, by way of explanation for his need to ask: "We use the word in a rather narrow sense, albeit an important one for those who believe in it."

"Material universes come and go," the sphinx told him. "Not randomly, to be sure—far from randomly, if those who claim to survive transubstantiations can be trusted—but rather more frequently than observers sometimes suspect. You have no idea how fragile a material universe is, within the greater scheme of things, nor how easily it might be transformed by the whim of God."

"The whim?" Francis queried. "You see God as a whimsical being, then?"

"Creativity unlimited," the sphinx informed him, "implies a certain artistic temperament—but we do not know the mind of God any better than you do. We, too, act for our own purposes . . . and on our own whims."

"And what do you intend to do with us," Francis asked, "when we have slaked the thirst of your whimsical curiosity?"

"This," said the Shadow, reverting to its true, quite unimaginable self.

## 10

Francis did not know what to expect when he unfolded on to the orbital platform, but he was not surprised to find it occupied by giant insects—human-sized insects, that is—whose appearance put him in mind of the kind of larva that Englishmen called a Devil's coach-horse. He still felt rather unsteady after enduring the process of being put back together again—which had, for various reasons, been even more disconcerting than the process of being torn apart—and had only the vaguest idea of what he might expect of himself, but his hastily conceived plan required him not to put up any resistance at this point. He allowed himself to be seized by the Devil's coach-horses and held.

The Selenites waited for a few minutes to discover whether anyone else would follow Francis, but soon decided that he must be alone. They made no attempt to remove his helmet or to interrogate him at the orbital station, but simply returned him to the focal point of the hyperetheric transmitter and dispatched him to the surface of the moon. There he was received by another party of insects, less heavily armed and armored and more reminiscent in appearance of worker ants. The ant-like Selenites wasted no time before taking him below the surface. Although Francis looked swiftly around before being swallowed up, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Selenite Armada, or some fraction of it, he saw nothing but a bleak monochrome plain, pitted and strewn with dust.

He was not taken far into the interior. Nor did he have to wait long, seated on a stone ledge in a sealed room, attended by two guards, before an interrogator was summoned. The interrogator was more reminiscent of a damsel-fly than an ant, largely by virtue of its glossy blue coloring. It had a head that was somewhat less intimidating than the heads of the ant-like Selenites, let alone the fearsomely jawed heads of the Devil's coach-horses, because it had little in the way of palps and mandibles, but it had the same large compound eyes. Its mouth, carefully equipped with lips capable of sounding the plosives of human languages, but devoid of mammalian teeth, seemed very strange indeed.

The interrogator put its head close to Francis' helmet in order to tell him, in English, that he might remove it. He did so, meekly. The air in the sublunar chamber was odorous, but not particularly rank. Francis breathed it in gratefully enough.

"Three went through," the interrogator said, unceremoniously. "One is dead. Where is the third?" The second sentence of the three told Francis that the Selenites must have sent an expeditionary force to the world with the ruined surface, which had found Judah Low's body, but that the investigators had not lingered long, presumably—and rightly—fearful of capture by their unrebellious kin.

"Safe, I hope," Francis replied. "The world's fleshcore is uninjured. The True Civilization has been interrupted, but it will be restored. It will be transfigured, but not in the way that you might hope or imagine. You must not launch the Armada. Let Earth alone, and a diplomatic settlement might yet be reached."

"Is that the message you brought from the Great Fleshcores?" the interrogator asked.

"That was the message that I was sent back to deliver," Francis countered, evasively.

The interrogator seemed to be satisfied. The return of a single human must seem to the Selenites to be a feeble diplomatic overture, expressive of no great insistence. The Selenites were evidently working on the assumption that a *fait accompli* would eventually be acceptable to the Great Fleshcores, at least to the extent that the Fleshcores would let the lunar rebels pursue their own Reformist objectives with respect to humankind. The Selenites were counting on widespread support among other insects, at least, assuming that the involvement of the Arachnids would guarantee that.

"Are my friends alive?" Francis asked.

"The humans who attempted to defend the orbital transmitter against our assault suffered several casualties," the interrogator told him, "but only one has died; the other true humans have been given appropriate medical treatment and segregated from the Arachnid hybrids and the fleshcore probe. You will be imprisoned with the other humans, but you will not be harmed. When the battle is won, you will be returned to the surface of your planet. Our intention has always been to preserve and protect your species, and to prepare it for proper incorporation into the True Civilization. When we have destroyed the Arachnids and the rogue machines, there will be no further need for violence."



Francis did not believe that the interrogator meant what it said; it had to know that the war would go on for centuries, if not for millennia, even if the Arachnids and the freethinking machines could be removed from the immediate battlefield—which seemed unlikely.

"You must not launch the Armada," Francis repeated—but the warning was half-hearted, and he did not attempt to back it up with threats. He had already made his own plans. He could have wished for more time to accustom himself to his borrowed form and the abilities that went with it, but while he was manifest in his familiar and fundamental guise, he was confined by its limitations. So was Lumen, of whose presence within him the Selenite interrogator seemed unsuspecting—or perhaps uncaring.

"The Armada is already half way to Earth," the interrogator told him, with what might have been a trace of smug satisfaction. It hesitated, seemingly searching for a *mot juste*. Eventually, it added: "The die is cast." It had obviously learned the English language from an educated source, and was enthusiastic to show off its skill, even though it had no idea that it was talking to the cleverest Englishman of all.

The interrogation, Francis knew, had been a tokenistic gesture. The Selenites did not believe that there was anything more they needed to know. They had expected him to be sent back to say exactly what he had said, if he were ever sent back at all. The worker ants took him away again, hurrying him through dimly lit corridors. He was content to be hurried; time was running out. When he made his move, he would have to be exceedingly swift.

There were three men in the cell to which Francis was committed, two of them abed. The one who was still standing, apparently quite well, was Anthony. The other two were Kit Marlowe and Edward de Vere; they had obviously been hurt, but whatever medical treatment the Selenites had administered was taking effect; they both contrived to sit up when the newcomer arrived, and both seemed heartily glad to see him alive and quite well.

Anthony's greeting was understandably effusive, but Francis had to cut him short. "What became of Faust?" he demanded.

Anthony was startled by the question, but de Vere replied from his sickbed. "Died a hero," he said. "But for him and Raleigh, we'd never have got the three of you away. Raleigh's alive, and the golem too, but the insects took them away. What news of Low and the girl?"

"Low was too badly injured," Francis told him. "Patience is alive and well. Are you and Marlowe well enough to walk—to run, if necessary?"

"Perhaps," de Vere said, standing up in response to the tone of Francis' voice, having deduced that the question was not idle. "I weigh but a trifle here, and will not need more than a fraction of my strength." Marlowe stood up too, nodding assent.

"In a few moments," Francis said, "you'll be free, and armed. You must get up to the surface and take possession of the transmitter that brought me here. Return to the orbital platform and capture it—there are half a dozen fearsome insects guarding it, and they might still be watchful, but you must defeat them. Raleigh and the golem must realign the apparatus and complete their intended journey. If you three do not have air enough, or have to counter further opposition, you may return to the surface—but you must be ready to defend the link in Kent, whatever it costs."

"They took our helmets away," Anthony said.

"I'll get them back," Francis promised. "Do you understand the part you must play?"

Anthony plainly did not, and Marlowe seemed uncertain, but it was almost as if de Vere had been anticipating some such opportunity with relish and determination. The earl stretched his limbs to test his readiness, then nodded; "Trust me, Master Bacon," he said, "we'll take and hold the platform. What do you intend to do?"

"This," said Francis, unable to resist the temptation to show off—and walked into the wall of the cell. The determination to make a spectacular demonstration served him well; he found that it was best to use his new abilities as unthinkingly as he could, as if they had always been natural to him.

It was the work of a moment to find Raleigh and his two adapted men. "Patience is waiting for you in the center of the galaxy," he told the astonished explorer. "Be sure to tell her that Faust was not a traitor, if that has not been explained to her by the Ethereal accommodated within her. She will have made all the necessary overtures on behalf of your own hybrid kind by now; the rest may safely be left to the golem. When you come back, do everything possible to help de Vere secure the orbital platform—or, at least, the station in Kent. I can grant you a pause, but I shall be fully occupied elsewhere within the hour. Time is pressing." He moved through the wall again before Raleigh could formulate a question, and found the golem.

"Low and Faust are dead," he told the creature, which had immediately assumed the familiar form of Christian Rosenkreutz in response to his appearance, "but Patience Muffet survived unscathed, probably by virtue of playing host to Aristocles. She might need the support of your advocacy if the Fleshcores are to be reassured. With luck, we shall be able to send you news in a matter of hours; it might yet be bad, but there is every reason now to think that the Selenite invasion can be thwarted, if Dee and Digges have done their job well. There will be no second chance to mount such an invasion, if you can do your part and I can do mine."

Without waiting for an answer, Francis reached out and clasped the golem's arm, hand to wrist, exactly as the golem had once clasped his. He knew that the golem would not understand immediately all that the clasp could tell it, but he was confident that the other would eventually be able to deduce far more than he had been able to divine himself. In the meantime, the creature would do what was required of it.

"Who did this to you?" was the one question that the golem managed to articulate. "A Shadow," Francis told him. "There are more steps on the ladder of Creation—or the ladder of Evolution—than you or I, or even the Ethereals, were able to imagine. It is, however, a ladder that all species might climb, given time and the will."

This time, when he walked into the walls of the Selenite prison, he initiated a moonquake that blasted the doors from all the cells in which prisoners were held, and stunned the busy workers in their thousands. By means of the exotic ripples he sent forth, Francis manipulated the lunar rock as easily as he manipulated the enclosed atmosphere, clearing the way for the captured individuals to make their escape, not merely to the surface but all the way to the platform orbiting the Earth.

When the escape was guaranteed, he delivered the helmets and weapons he had promised. Then he left his brother and the others to do their work, and took flight.

## 11

Francis thought of what he was doing as "taking flight" because he had no other way to think of it, except for "folding himself" into and along imperceptible dimensions. "Taking flight" was the more pleasing analogy, if not the more accurate; it allowed him to imagine himself a member of the great legendary company of firebirds and sphinxes, hippogriffs and dragons. To think of what he could now do merely as "folding" would have demeaned that stature, and he did not want to do so. This opportunity to be a demigod would not last long, and he doubted that he would retain much legacy from it, or ever obtain another.

"Now *this*," said Lumen, his invisible passenger, "is exhilarating. Who would have

thought that our nine dimensions were such a meager complement of the true complexity of ultraspace?"

Francis knew full well that "ultraspace" was a mere linguistic contrivance—but some such device was necessary, if they were to talk at all. He would have preferred to think in terms of Shadowlands, or Immaterial Empires of Shadow Matter, but Lumen had been humbled by the encounter with the Shadow, and was not in an expansive mood. Indeed, it seemed deeply resentful that the Shadow's loan had been made to Francis, and that the abilities on loan had been so intimately linked to the latter's human consciousness.

"Does that exhilaration justify your engagement in the game?" Francis asked, attempting to inject an acid bitterness into the silent question. "Will it make you the evident winner, and give poor Aristocles cause for jealousy?"

"It began as a game," Lumen replied, "but it became infinitely more serious, as all the best games do. All life is competition, all ambition gambling. You should be grateful to me, Francis. Without me, you would have none of this. You should be grateful to Aristocles, too—we might have been the provocative agents that precipitated this dispute into violence, but we are also the allies that have made it possible for you to win a spectacular victory. Had we and the Selenites let you alone, you might have taken thousands of years to reach this critical point in the history of your species, and might easily have been fitted for life in the True Civilization without any question or opposition ever being raised, even in the absence of a rebel crusade."

That was all true, Francis knew, but he could not quite bring himself to be grateful to the nascent Ethereals—who had, after all, been following their own agenda and their own whim, not even bothering to convince themselves that they were doing God's will.

Ideally, he would have preferred to descend to the Earth's surface before taking a hand in the battle, but he did not have that option. Although the Shadow had lent him abilities that would have made him seem godlike to many a human being, he was still a prisoner of time and the intrinsic limitations of the ethereal plenum; he could not "fly" faster than the speed of light in any semblance of material form. The Armada was too far advanced in its course to leave him any time to spare—and John Dee's fleet had already taken off to meet it.

Drake was in overall command of the fleet, with Philip Sidney as his chief lieutenant, but Dee and Thomas Digges had been the architects of its strategy as well as the vessels themselves. The crucial engagement, they had always known, would need to take place long before the Armada reached the limits of Earth's atmosphere, allowing its vessels to scatter. The Selenite ether-ships were already diverging in their courses, but they had to remain close together for the greater part of their journey in order to follow Earthbound trajectories that their fuel could sustain. Although the Earth and its satellite were only two hundred and fifty thousand miles apart, that was sufficient to reduce the bulk of both worlds to mere pinheads on a diagram drawn to scale. The Armada had to remain more or less united for most of the journey, for purely practical reasons, and its commanders had doubtless made the calculation that it would be better to make what virtue they could of the necessity. In the first encounter with Earth's defenders, at least, they would remain in tight formation, endeavoring to smash through whatever formation the terrestrial vessels adopted like a battering-ram, forcing the defending fleet to disperse with tempestuous fire.

Drake, in his turn, would try to mount a coherent and coordinated attack, hoping to reduce the Armada's numbers, with his own firepower, to a level at which the survivors of that first encounter might be too few to deliver more than a hundred cargoes of eggs into the atmosphere—which might, in turn, be too few to deliver more

than a dozen successfully to the surface. There, any nests that were established would hopefully be hunted down and destroyed, with assistance from the Arachnids and Talos—and any more individuals of either of their kinds that might succeed in reaching Earth's surface in the near future.

The terrestrial fleet was outnumbered, but not outgunned. Digges had told Francis, the last time they had met, that it was impossible to know what the balance of devastation might be after that first deadly encounter, nor what might be done thereafter by way of regrouping and giving chase. "These are not naval vessels that can turn about in a matter of minutes, given a mile or so of sea-room," the engineer had observed. "The space and time necessary to mount a pursuit might be too great to allow any successful chase to be mounted, in practice. If the first meeting of the fleets goes badly for us, we might not get a second chance to assault the invaders effectively—not, at least, until they reach the surface. The atmosphere is our ally, of course—but we would be fools to expect or hope that mere friction might succeed if our guns cannot. We not only have to win that first exchange of fire, but win it very decisively indeed."

Digges was absolutely right, Francis knew. If the Selenites succeeded in establishing even a handful of nests on the Earth's surface, and defending them against attempts to wipe them out while they were still in their infancy, a war might be set in train that would last hundreds or thousands of years. On the other hand, friction might now be a better friend than Thomas Digges dared hope.

"You ought to accept my help," Lumen told him, as their flight finally brought them within "sight" of the Selenite Armada. "You have no skill or artistry in this work. What you did on the moon was a mere finger-exercise, crude and brutal. This requires delicacy, else you might easily cause far more destruction than you intend, not merely to Drake's fleet but to the Earth itself."

"I know," said Francis. "That's why the Shadow united us again—but I won't surrender my new instruments of action to your volition. I'll make whatever use of your skills I can, but your game is over—and if any other Ethereal attempts to take a hand in this, I shall unleash such fury . . ."

"None will interfere!" Lumen protested. "Aristocles is halfway across the galaxy, and cannot return until Patience Muffet does. In any case, no one—not even the Selenites—wants to see the Earth destroyed or devastated, and no Ethereal, nascent or ancient, would risk getting in your way."

"I'm not so certain of the Selenites," Francis told him. "They will sustain heavy losses no matter how this encounter goes. They have no compunction in sacrificing their own soldiers; I cannot imagine that they will be careful of human lives if things go badly."

"You mistake them," Lumen told him. "To devastate the surface of a world where rebellious machines have run riot or an Arachnid invasion has taken place is one thing, and insects do indeed routinely send their soldiers and workers to destruction without an atom of compunction, conscious that the true individual is the hive rather than the component—but no intelligent creature would dare to place a populated world in peril, for fear of the Creator's wrath."

"I hope that is so," said Francis, although he knew full well that he was no more an agent of wrath than he was an instrument of the Creator. All that had happened to him was that a Shadow—a mere creature, with its own nature, its own interests, and its own whims—had lent him the means to defend his and humankind's ambitions, in consequence of its own game-playing impulse, or its own sense of justice. He knew well enough that the Earth was merely a tiny footnote in a complex story whose real plot was concerned with the materialization of millions of Shadows in the chaotic flux of matter surrounding the Pit at the heart of the galaxy, and that any gross

transubstantiation of the galaxy's material structure that might happen in the near future would result from the deployment of powers many orders of magnitude greater than those momentarily at his disposal. Even so, he had a chance to serve as a provocative agent, and to ensure that the Earth's catalytic role in the affairs of the True Civilization would not be rudely cut short.

He had almost caught up with the Selenite Armada when Drake's fleet engaged it, and Earth's ether-ships opened fire.

Although the "body" in which Francis was traveling through the ether was markedly different from the familiar appearance he had temporarily assumed on the orbital platform and the moon, it still had to receive sensory information in an analogous fashion. His "eyes" were extraordinarily powerful, but they still made up a mental image by means of rays of light impinging upon his physical presence. Human eyes would have seen almost nothing at all of the battle in space, no matter where they were positioned; although Francis was able to do a great deal better than that, his impression was still rather slight and fleeting. He saw immediately, though, and understood, that this was—as Digges had observed—quite unlike a naval battle fought on an Earthly sea, and very different indeed from any clash of soldiers and artillery on a terrestrial battlefield.

There was no evidence, in visible or audible terms, of weapons being fired; all that could be seen was the result of those shots that struck home. Francis knew, when the first ships on either side disintegrated, that for every shot that did strike home, hundreds might be going astray—but both fleets had been equipped with similar aiming devices, presumably by virtue of the fact that Aristocles had stolen the designs he had fed to Edward Kelley and John Dee from the Selenites. By the time he had counted eight vessels destroyed—four on each side—Francis knew how evenly balanced the two forces were. He also knew by then that the Selenite Armada outnumbered Drake's fleet by five hundred and forty vessels to two hundred—a larger proportionate advantage than he had hoped.

"I can't wait," he said to Lumen.

Lumen, already privy to his reasoning, made no protest—not even to ask him to consider what the effect might be of his materializing on Drake's bridge.

## 12

**F**ive long seconds went by between the confirmation of the decision and its being put into effect, because Francis was still unable to reach the defending fleet during that interval—and when he was able to effect it, he did indeed cause great consternation among Drake's crew.

In fact, the ether-ship had no bridge in any conventional sense; its interior was filled with equipment, with only tiny pockets of space into which its crew was wedged. There was hardly any space into which Francis could fit a simulacrum of his own body, but he dared not adopt any other appearance. He materialized in front of Drake, who had Thomas Digges wedged in beside him, operating the apparatus that communicated with all the other ships.

"What is this?" Drake exclaimed, when what he took to be a ghost, or an illusion, appeared before his eyes.

"You must trust me, Captain," Francis said. "However impossible it seems, I really am Francis Bacon, operating with aid from an ethereal and forces even more powerful. I doubt that you or Dee had time to receive my letters, but I have traveled to the center of the Milky Way and back within the last twenty-four hours, and have been gifted with a means to help us. Tell your own gunner to stand down, I beg you. Tom—

bid all the other gunners listen for my voice instead of yours, speaking directly into their heads. Instruct them to relax their limbs, and not to fight me."

Drake, Francis saw, would not have done it. He had insufficient belief in miracles—but Thomas Digges was hesitating in puzzlement. It was Digges' hand that Francis grasped and squeezed. "You see, Tom," he said, in a voice that was not his own. "I promised that we would meet again, and that you would know the truth. I owe you a debt, and am ready to repay it. Go, Francis! You cannot linger here, while the Armada is already dispersing. You must entrust this part, at least, to me!"

It was Francis' turn to hesitate—but not for long. There was no time. "Separate, then!" he said.

Francis' body was, for the time being, a mere simulacrum, but that did not prevent Lumen from emerging from his nostrils like a plume of smoke, which rapidly formed itself into the image of a vaporous moth—and flew, just as rapidly, into Thomas Digges' nostrils.

Drake had seen that before, and had at least some reason to think that he and the other members of John Dee's first crew might not have survived their adventure had the ethereal not chosen to involve itself. In any case, Digges was already giving orders, in a voice other than his own.

"Can you maintain communication with the other gunners without my presence?" Francis asked—aloud, because he was uncertain that Lumen could still hear his silent voice.

"Yes," said Lumen, speaking through Thomas Digges. "Go—and pray to God that you do not need me after all, for you might still have the better part of two hundred vessels to deal with, no matter how effective my aim may be."

Francis took flight once more—and saw, once his viewpoint was distributed through the ether again, that he had very little time indeed if he were to catch the Selenite vessels as he intended.

Lumen, fortunately, did seem to be a better aiming-device than the mechanical one his cousin and competitor had provided by way of the black stone. Although Dee's ships continued to sustain losses as the two fleets converged, drawing gradually apart as they did so, while Drake's gunners strove to locate the slowly dispersing Selenite vessels, the Selenite Armada was now taking much heavier losses. The margin of difference was becoming more conspicuous with every second that passed.

Already, though, a dozen Selenite vessels had passed beyond range of Drake's light-cannon in an Earthward direction. Lumen was correct. Given the difficulty of maneuvering the ether-ships, somewhere between a hundred and fifty and two hundred were likely to come through that first encounter, and the chances of Drake's ships being able to give chase to them were very slim indeed, even if Drake still had fifty or a hundred ships of his own to make the attempt.

The Selenites had not won yet, though, for they had two barriers yet to overcome: the friction of the atmosphere and the intense affinity drawing them to the Earth's surface. The fleshy crews and cargoes they contained had doubtless been designed with all the alchemical skill at the Selenites' disposal, but the Selenites could not have tested their personnel and products in the field.

Francis knew how foolhardy it would be to hope that the Selenites might simply have made mistakes in designing intelligent insects that could operate successfully in the grip of Earthly affinity; the Arachnids were their superiors in that kind of science, but if the Arachnids could do it, then the Selenites could do it too. Friction was the ally he needed—and, in truth, the only ally he had, for he too could not transport the powers that he now had to the Earth's surface, deep in the punishing well of affinity. When he returned to his native environment, he would have to do so as his ordinary self, with all its limitations.



Until then, however, he was at least half a Shadow, with abilities that exceeded those of an ethereal in the matter of creating storm-winds.

The Selenite vessels were still approaching the Earth on very similar trajectories, but some were slowing down, in order that they could enter the atmosphere at very different points, and fall along a line that would wind twice or three times round the globe, displaced sideways on each circuit. In free fall, they might land anywhere between the tropics, and perhaps some little way outside, on any of the major continents.

Their fall was, however, far from free. Francis could not embrace the globe—even a tiny fraction of its atmosphere—directly, but he could initiate chain reactions between the molecules of the atmosphere that whipped up winds and whirlpools in the upper strata of the air and the etheric plenum with which it mingled at such heights. He could not act directly upon all the Selenite vessels at once, or even a few at a time, but the time they took to complete their own staggered orbits gave him the time he needed to send deadly ripples after each and every one.

By comparison with the delicacy with which Lumen had plucked attacking insects away from their human victims on the orbital platform, the work that Francis did was very clumsy indeed. Even Lumen could not have played the consummate artist in this enterprise, exercising fine control over every individual action and reaction, but Lumen would not have been a mere child splashing recklessly in the shallows of a placid lake, as Francis regretfully imagined himself to be. Even that clumsy splashing was adequate to its task, however.

One by one, the Selenite vessels descended into the Earth's atmosphere, and were torn apart, one by one, by the angry air. Some burned up entire, others fell apart and became showers of smoking debris. Some got much closer to the ground than others—some, perhaps, close enough for their cargoes to stand a chance of reaching the ground without being burned up—but none escaped unscathed. That, Francis was sure, would be enough to ensure that none of them could successfully complete their mission.

There would be no second Armada, he knew; the Fleshcores would see to that, if the rogue machines and the Arachnids could not. The entire galaxy would know before very long what a bone of contention the Earth was, and that it would not lack defenders if it were attacked again. Once the system of hyperetheric links was properly restored, the Selenite blockade would be over, and the Selenites themselves would be dispersed into the vast corpus of the True Civilization.

Francis continued to stir up storms until he was certain that the last of the Selenite vessels had been accounted for; only then did he spare time and attention to rue the residual havoc that might reach the surface, in the form of hurricanes and tornadoes, and the casualties that humankind might suffer as a result—perhaps as many as the casualties suffered by Drake's fleet, whose surviving vessels were now beginning to complete the long loops that would direct them homeward.

Francis waited for the remainder of the fleet, but resisted the temptation to manifest himself in Drake's flagship for a second time. The important task he now had before him was to calm the ether, and then the Earth's atmosphere, in order to smooth the homeward journey of the heroes who had extracted the Armada's sting.

That work was more difficult by far than the work he had already done; destruction, as he was well aware, is invariably easier to sow than harmony, chaos easier to create than order. He was still an infant splashing awkwardly, but he was determined to do what he could. He was no creator, but he knew now what the work of creation entailed, and how valuable intricate chains of cause and effect might be. Against the odds, perhaps, he succeeded in calming the ether and the air alike, sufficiently to permit Drake's survivors to descend safely to the surface.

In all, some eighty-seven vessels came safely back to Earth, out of two hundred

that had set out. That was a better ratio than Dee and Digges had dared to count on, and a better one than they had promised their crewmen when calling for recruits. More than six hundred men had been lost in the battle—but there was no way to count the number of lives that might have been sacrificed, along with the human species' prerogative of self-development, had the Armada not been thwarted.

All in all, Francis was not dissatisfied.

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**B**efore surrendering his borrowed abilities, as he was bound to do, Francis made one last rendezvous with Lumen, in the placid etheric ocean a few million miles from the gentle turbulence associated with the orbits of the Earth and Moon.

"Digges and Drake got safely home with the others," the ethereal told him. "Poor doubting Thomas did not have time to forgive me, but I think he will look back with gratitude, in time—if you can help him to understand."

"I shall need to understand myself before I can do that," Francis said. "I feel, at present, that the understanding I desire is at the command of my whim, but I doubt that I will feel the same when I am only myself again. All this will seem to have been a dream, no matter how convinced I am of the fact that it was all reality."

"Material memories are so fragile and confused," the ethereal told him, "that I thank God continually for having been born an ethereal."

"Will Aristocles concede defeat in your game when you confront him?" Francis asked, acidly, "or will he claim that the intervention of the Shadow rendered the contest null and void?"

"Even if it were still no more than a game," Lumen said, "Aristocles and I would reckon that the matter of who won was far less important than the quality of the contest—and in that respect, neither of us could be disappointed. The intervention of the Shadow was, from that viewpoint, something of a *coup*. The ancients will pretend to be uninterested, and will declare in shocked tones that, had we mastered the Memory, we would never have been so foolish, but they will not be able to hold that opinion for long. In any case, this is not goodbye. You will doubtless hear from me again—and Kelley will doubtless hear from more than one of us, if he can withstand the pressure of madness."

"Easier said than done, apparently," Francis said. "He has half a dozen apprentice seers in training, but they have all had their difficulties."

"Arachnid alchemy will doubtless help with that," the ethereal relied. "Thomas Muffet is back in England now, and Patience will make a perfect apprentice. You do not need me to warn you, I suppose, to be a little wary of Raleigh—and of Low's golem too, if it chooses to return or is ordered to do so."

"None of these interferers seem to have done us overmuch harm, as yet," Francis said, although he could not yet forgive the Selenite Armada and those who had set in train the chain of causality leading to its launch, "but now we know the extent to which we have been led, I think we will be more determined in future to see to our own guidance."

"And so you should," Lumen said. "The only way, in the final analysis, to avoid being relegated to the status of pieces in other entities' games, is to become players yourselves. You might be able to do that now—provided that the next universal transubstantiation is long enough delayed to grant you the time, or that your species is preserved during the metamorphosis. I shall need to discover the Shadows' purpose, if I can; there may be strange and turbulent times ahead, and not merely for the True Civilization."

"I wish you luck with that," Francis said. "At least you have had the advantage of meeting one, and sharing in its borrowed powers. Let me know what you discover, if you can."

"It's not impossible," Lumen told him, although Francis knew that it was mere flattery, and probably absurd, "that I shall be the one seeking enlightenment from you."

After that, Francis' return to Earth was swift. Before he went to make his reports to John Dee and Queen Jane, he called in on his brother—who was, remarkably enough, in Stephen Batman's house, completing the task that Francis had begun and then left incomplete.

"I did not know whether I would see you again," Anthony explained. "I thought you might have returned to the heart of the galaxy, or taken up permanent residence on the Moon. Now that you can walk through walls and fly through the ether without the need of a ship, London must seem a very narrow arena in which to extend your career as a magician. A task like this is surely far beneath you."

"I have shrunk to my former three dimensions," Francis assured him. "I have not an atom of magic left in me—less than Ned Kelley, for sure. I am a humble scholar again, and painstaking tasks like sorting Stephen's notes are not beneath me, any more than they are beneath you. You have been outside the Earth as well, and know by sight how tiny it really is."

"But my firebird was only a giant parrot, after all," Anthony replied, "and Low's golem was only some monstrous slug. Even Raleigh is nothing more than a man who has grown an elephant's hide and a little extra hair. Wonders I have certainly seen, but I cannot help feeling that the world seems a little less magical than it did before—all the more so if you are again no more than my little brother, the bane of my existence."

"It was you, was it not," Francis said, "who tried to shield me from the insects when we were taken by surprise, and made sure that I escaped?"

"Mere instinct," Anthony assured him. "The same instinct that guided me in support of de Vere's heroism when we took the platform back. In any case, I could not have saved you the first time without Faust's help, any more than I could have held the platform the second time without de Vere and Marlowe. Faust was the one acting out of duty, and it cost him his life. Kit intends to write a play about him, you know, to celebrate his part in the salvation of the world. Rumor has it, though, that every playwright in London has some similar subject in mind. De Vere says that his will be a comedy, with himself as the hero—although he will have to borrow another man's name for a signature if he does that."

"It was a comedy," Francis said. "For which we should all be truly thankful. Had it been a tragedy, as it might so easily have become, it would not be a suitable subject for drama for at least five hundred years. The plays are bound to be dishonest, though—the society to which Marlowe and de Vere belong still exists, even if its figurehead is presently absent; it will be all the more determined to keep its secrets."

"There are no secrets," Anthony told him. "Given the way that the ladies of the court are swarming around Drake, in spite of his antiquity, and Sidney, in spite of his marriage, and even humble Tom Digges, in spite of his being a mathematician, every last moment of what occurred will be common knowledge within a week." He did not mention any attention he might have received himself from the ladies of the court, but he had not been able to make the general point without blushing.

"Oh, there are secrets still," Francis told him. "There will always be secrets—but how insipid would life be, if there were not puzzles to solve, secrets to penetrate, and games to play? How could there be change, let alone transubstantiation, without secrets to pursue, and sometimes capture?" ○

# TRUE FAME

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us “Thirteen, fourteen years ago, my future bride and I were vacationing in the Muskoka region of Ontario. At an outdoor restaurant beside one of the countless scenic lakes in the region, we spotted a familiar face. I thought it was ‘him,’ and Leslie thought so too. Then we decided it wasn’t. He was eating at the other end of the patio, alone, and he left alone, walking with a swagger, jumping into a boat and speeding away. Immediately, from every other table, people were asking, ‘Was that Kurt Russell?’ We found out later that yes, he and Goldie vacationed there that summer—hence, the nucleus of a story about facial recognition software.”

This is the prettiest restaurant they’ve seen in quite a while. He says so, and she tells him to please not look at the waitresses, and he responds with a smile and the reflexive promise to be good. His girlfriend has no reason for concerns, and she knows it. Laughing and sitting back, she continues studying the closest faces. He looks past the ornate iron rail, down at the lake, watching the boats tied to the floating docks and the blue-gray water and the various islands sitting between here and the horizon. This lake is much better than their lake. Its water is deeper and colder, roads forbidden everywhere but inside this one tiny resort town. His portal-glasses reach past the horizon, blending views from a variety of easy sources. Second homes stand on the lakeshore and every island. Some might be third or fourth homes, and every last one resembles a tiny palace. But the real mark of wealth is the extravagant distance between front doors. These days, just the illusion of solitude is a treasure. The two of them have invested a year’s savings for the privilege of sleeping six nights in a retrofitted trailer that sits beside a shallow and muddy body of water, and they are not poor people. Yet it’s easy to feel destitute in a setting like this. Even the boats are impressive. One vessel looks like an ordinary twelve-meter cabin cruiser, but its design doesn’t match any popular model, and the hull shows signs of morphing capacities. The license number is a phony, but that isn’t a difficult problem. A reliable savant in Sri Lanka makes useful suggestions, and he focuses on the door behind the cockpit, his glasses teasing out the first twenty-eight digits of a code that leads a few seconds later to the boat’s builder and its specifications, and then to its present owner. Sure enough, the machine can transform into any of five different shapes, including a spacious deep-water submarine. “Neat,” he says, and she asks, “What is?” But he’s already searching the tables scattered across the pink granite patio, finding the neurosurgeon sitting with his youthful third wife and a slightly younger, thoroughly bored son left over from his first wife: The great mariner on vacation, enjoying his green salad and an enormous glass of cold green tea.

“What’s neat?” she asks again.

He mentions the boat, letting her discern the rest for herself.

Then he asks in turn, "Find anybody?"

She offers three names. In principle, they wield identical recognition software and portal-glasses, and they know the same savants and coyotes and misfits. But the girlfriend has always been a little quicker when it comes to digesting faces. That bothered him for the first month or two. But he eventually realized that he had her beat when it comes to prying secrets from behind the Privacy Acts of '17 and '39. Each of them has strengths, and they compliment each other quite nicely, and what more can you ask from a couple?

She repeats the second name. He spots a sixty-one-year-old male with his back to them but his craggy, once-handsome face reflected in the restaurant's long window. He makes a few queries, and while waiting for the coyotes to track down interesting treats, they study the menu, discussing the relative merits of cultured burgers and yogurt shakes. At these inflated prices, they decide, it means one or the other, but probably not both.

"So did you find his movie?" she finally asks.

As a twenty-eight-year-old, their subject made a video showing him and a young woman doing the nasty in the woods, and like a lot of people in those days, he posted his work on a marginally anonymous site. The old man probably believes that the embarrassing data was lost ages ago, or that the commercial software for Web-wide purges has real value. But that isn't how it works. The two of them smile silently, investing the next thirty seconds watching a bawdy, amateurish show. Then their waitress appears, asking with a clipped, marginally friendly voice, "So are you ready to order?"

It's a coincidence just how much the waitress resembles the girl in that old sex show. She's small and blonde and not quite pretty, but far from homely. She doesn't wear a nametag, but there isn't a trace of surprise when they say in the same moment, "Hello, Tina."

Tina looks at their faces. She smiles. Then because they mentioned her name, she can now politely use theirs.

He opts for the burger.

The girlfriend wants a yogurt shake, chocolate and with two spoons.

They have rules when it comes to pretty young things. But he takes the risk, watching their waitress for the next few minutes. Everywhere but here, he studies her. He finds a birth announcement from sixteen years ago. He uncovers school grades and family portraits buried in enduring servers. But her presence is a fraction of what her parents once made available to the Web. People who are now middle-aged and elderly citizens would throw everything up on those early sites, and they would blog obsessively about every tiny drama and embarrassing fart, and photographs would be shared, and videos would be crafted—the more outrageous, the better—and like everything foolish, it all seemed fresh and fun. By contrast, the most explicit piece of Tina's life is some interesting, edgy poetry that she reads for him now, two months in the past and sitting alone in her little bedroom, surrounded by a small nation of semi-intelligent, big-eyed stuffed animals.

His arm is touched.

The pressure of his girlfriend's fingers brings him back to the present, to here. She stares off into the distance now. His sense is that her glasses are set at maximum magnification, her focus absolute. She has touched his arm by memory, blind to everything but what her glasses feed her.

He asks, "Who?"

She says nothing.

"Which face?" he says.

For a moment, she acts deaf. Then she blinks and forces herself to sit back, doing

nothing but smiling. Genuinely gorgeous and slender to the brink of wiry, she has dark brown hair curled with gene treatments and tiny, doll-like features that never require makeup. Her link-pins peek through the curls. Smart-tattoos ride the backs of both hands, randomly playing slices of favorite entertainments. By any measure, the young woman is gifted. But she also enjoys an infectious certainty born from her abilities. The first time they met, he hated her. She dredged up obscure facts about him and then teased him savagely. Of course her life was full of reasons to label her as trouble and move on. Yet here they sit, enjoying their second summer vacation as a couple, as a team. And suddenly the other half of the team leans forward, pushing that wide uninhibited mouth into his ear, not quite whispering when she says, "At the far end of the patio. That man sitting alone with his mashed potatoes."

There is no choice but to be obvious. He leans back, twisting around to gain a clear look at the target.

"See him?" she asks.

"With the blond hair?"

"Yes."

The shaggy hair is long and thick, brushing against the subject's shoulders. The face is both handsome and distinctive. Several seconds are spent staring at the potato man, waiting for enlightenment. But nothing comes. More queries are made, using coyotes that cost a little more for their noses, and then she leans close again, asking, "Well?"

"Give me time," he begs.

She counts. Knowing it irritates him, she counts aloud, though softly, and when she says, "Sixty," her fingernails dig into his bare forearm.

"I don't recognize him," he says.

"Well, I don't either," she confesses.

They sit still for another half minute. And then they laugh, each saying to the other, "So who the hell is he?"

Masks and holo-disguises are obvious explanations. But portal-glasses should be able to tease apart any trace of subterfuge—a seam, a sparkle, or the wrong kind of reflection riding the honest sunlight. That's why the obvious explanations prove unworthy. No disguise, or even a combination of disguises, would convince their studied stares. So they discuss what else is possible, and the best answer from that unlikely heap is that this is a genuine face, only new. Autodocs and a lot of money might have created a fresh appearance, unscarred and unique. Yet even that possibility has drawbacks. A burn victim or a gender-switcher might be tempted. But once the patient reenters the public realm, he will be noticed. Security cameras will want a name. Passersby will throw his image to the coyotes, asking the obvious questions. Without an overt act on this man's part, the world will make him into a recognizable entity, and they should see that now—a history built from images and lunch purchases and the other dreary, unique detritus that no citizen can ever willfully avoid.

"Unless he has powerful friends," she mentions, her voice shivering as she points to that improbability.

He quickly identifies the trouble with that scenario. "If it's government work—if Potato-man is an operative or a hiding crime boss—they wouldn't make him into nobody. They'd give Potato-man a good fake life, and we wouldn't think about him twice."

People are hard-wired to spot strangers. That has always been true, and the last fifty years have only improved what is a most essential human talent.

"Unless of course somebody screwed up," she remarks. "Maybe his fake bio just got dumped, or his enemies deleted it, and we just happen to be the first two souls to notice."



Nothing about that is strictly impossible, but the explanation demands a sequence of incredible events. There must be a better answer. They fall silent, each trying to identify every remaining option. And that's when Tina emerges from the restaurant, their minimal lunch in hand.

"Ask your jail bait about him," the girlfriend suggests.

He doesn't like her tone. "What do you mean, darling?"

Those lovely, all-seeing eyes try to bore holes in his skull.

"You're being silly," he announces as the waitress arrives.

Tina isn't expecting a substantial tip. But she knows the importance of charm, if only to fool the neurologist and other wealthy customers who come here day after day. That's probably why she uses an overly friendly voice, asking them brightly, "Is there anything at all that I can do for you?"

Looking at his girlfriend, he says, "No. And thank you."

The waitress turns away gladly.

"Wait," the girlfriend says.

Tina turns back slowly.

"The man at the end of the patio. What is his name?"

That question strikes the youngster as being odd, even remarkable. She takes a few moments to parse the sense out of those unexpected words, and then finally, almost grudgingly, she turns and looks in just about the proper line.

"Which man?" Tina asks.

"At the last table," the girlfriend replies, as if it can't be more obvious.

Tina tugs at her portal-glasses for a moment. Then without looking back at her customers, she says, "Nobody. Nobody is there."

The man has suddenly, inexplicably vanished.

Tina wants to vanish too, but the best she can manage is to march over to the neurologist, enduring the lustful stares of the bored son.

"Where did he go?" both ask.

A map of the restaurant is found, studied. A small back staircase leaves the patio, leading to several viable escape routes. But their mystery man isn't trying to vanish. He simply went down to the lake by the most direct route, walking with purpose but never hurrying, the water on his right and the stone seawall on his left, and the two of them staring at him from above.

If Potato-man notices, no sign is given. He turns onto the middle dock and walks past boats that belong to others. Details continue to emerge from their careful study: The stranger is 184 centimeters tall, has muscular arms and a left-handed droop to his shoulder, and his jeans look honestly worn, and the plain orange shirt shows the telltale dark splotches of sweat that a quick chemical analysis shows to be genuine. A cleverly rendered android seems less and less likely, although neither of them is willing to relinquish the possibility. The hiking boots are dusty and battered on top, and because she has nothing better to do, the girlfriend compares those boots against the inventory in hundreds of catalogs, finding the proper model on a sporting goods site that hasn't been active for twenty years.

She explains, and he listens.

Then as the object of their fascination nears the end of the dock, she asks, "What do you think he'll do now?"

"Swim," he says.

He means this as a joke, but just saying the word gives the possibility muscle. No other boat is in view, and he continues walking with a pace that belies any intention of waiting for a ride from some vessel that is coming to collect him. Where the dock ends, he will pitch forward and leap into the water, and fitting his role as a creature

of ultimate mystery, he will morph into something other than a man, fins and a long jeweled tail breaking from the cold water, crimson gills flashing before he dives toward his underwater paradise.

They have stopped breathing, almost stopped thinking, anticipating the imminent spectacle.

Then the man steps off the dock, and as he drops, his boots pull apart and his body settles on the footrests of a little waterski that was always there, always waiting, tucked neatly out of view.

They laugh, relieved and disappointed in equal measure.

A small engine kicks to life, and the craft pulls away from the dock with the mystery man standing tall, hands on the handlebars and the throttle opening up with a rough, elderly sound that draws glances from a few patrons sitting nearby.

It is gratifying, knowing that others notice the stranger, too.

The girlfriend makes a low, vaguely angry sound, and then she suddenly stands.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving," she announces.

Their meal isn't half-eaten.

"I want to follow him," she says.

He does too. But he attacks her plan through its practicality. "How can we? We don't have a boat!"

"No?" she says, laughing at what to her has always been his persistent and frustrating cowardice. "I count thirty-four boats waiting for us. Which one do you want to take?"

Everybody is a thief. Everybody looks at each new face with the intention of stealing away secrets, learning what is interesting and funny and what is supposed to be private. Humans have always been that way; only their reach has changed. Some people are better than others at the ancient game, and the girlfriend takes deserved pride in being one of the best, not just with her innate skills but also her fearlessness, never hesitating to acquire and master the latest techniques of exploration.

Yet she really isn't much of a thief, she might argue. With a practiced, somewhat weary passion, she has pointed out that in the course of a busy day she might trip across a thousand secrets, a few of which would have enormous value to the cruel and rapacious. But she is neither. One careless owner neglects to upgrade his buzz-brain barriers and his e-ramparts, and through no fault of her own she can find herself in possession of keys to the fool's savings. But has she ever launched into a feeding frenzy? Never. And she refuses to act like some of her friends, stealing tiny, almost invisible sums from a multitude. That too has always been against her rules and an insult to her pride. "The worst thieves are the little ones, the gnats who steal pennies, making themselves rich but tiny. And that isn't me, I promise you."

When they first met, she was a middle-of-the-stream thief—somebody with the capacity to find a few misplaced dollars, as needed, and occasionally borrow property that only seemed to belong to others. But that was more than two years ago. After several fights and one painful ultimatum, she has managed to carry herself with remarkable restraint. He can count eleven lapses in twenty-eight months, although there are probably a few other misdemeanors hiding out of view. But isn't danger part of her charm? He doesn't approve of her slippery, self-serving ethics, but he loves the rest of her, and he has never seen any reason not to remain faithful to this beautiful, half-wild creature.

Adoring her is his calling and daily challenge.

She is fun, yes, and funny and bold and smart. The love of his life can tell a wonderful story, and even when she repeats herself, he is interested. Often enthralled.

But by the same token, she constantly frustrates him with her self-absorbed nature. When he speaks about his past life—his schools and silly loves, vanished friends and such—he often catches her staring through him. In their relationship, he has always felt like the significantly less fascinating character. If she doesn't like his story, she acts like a bored five-year-old. And if he repeats any anecdote, no matter how entertaining, she doesn't waste time warning him, "You've already told me that."

She's a great and dangerous thief who by choice has never lived up to her potential. But as they walk on the dock, he realizes that every promise for moderation is now being shoved aside.

"You can't do this," he says.

She says nothing.

"No," he begs. "Let's forget this, please." Then in the next moment, in despair, he mutters her name.

"Kora."

Even that shattered taboo has no effect. She remains silent and watchful, and they walk past big cabin cruisers and houseboats, hydrofoils and rocket-driven submersibles. Thankfully none of these vessels are easy to borrow. Or perhaps the scale of theft scares even her.

A long way out on the center dock, he finally hesitates, turning back and noticing faces casually studying their progress.

"We're noticed," he warns.

She smiles, shrugs.

He says, "Kora," once again, with a tight, worried voice. Then he starts to walk again, falling in behind her, claiming, "I'm not going with you."

"Yes you will."

"No," he maintains.

"Turn back," she suggests. "Go finish our lunch."

He wants to. But she's bound to find herself in terrible trouble, and what he loves this much can't be abandoned now.

She stops, announcing with authority, "Here. This one."

The boat is small but fancy—a fisherman's toy built for stability as well as speed, with a squared bow and twin jets intended to whisk passengers and their fancy lures to and from the best water.

He starts to glance over his shoulder and then thinks better of it. "People are watching us," he repeats.

Then he hears voices, soft at first but quickly growing in volume, in intensity—a mishmash of words and exclamations coupled with the sound of dozens of chairs being dragged across the pink face of the patio.

He asks, "What—?"

She names an actor—a man of astonishing good looks and boundless talent, a godly creature that would be famous in any century. Then she smiles back at him, calmly explaining, "He just took the table that our man left."

Stupidly, he says, "Yes?" and believes her.

She laughs at him.

"It's a trick?" he asks.

She winks.

"You fooled everybody?"

She jumps into the fishing boat, feet straddling the assorted tackle.

"How did you manage it?" he asks.

Not even looking back, she declares, "It was easy," even though it can't be. Then she tells him, "Hurry, darling. They won't be confused for long."

The boat believes that that they own it and always have. He unties both ropes and

jumps in after the girlfriend, and moments later, running smoothly and quietly, they streak unnoticed out across water that is deep and clean and deliciously, wondrously cold.

The waterski's trail remains visible: A million agitations coupled with tiny contaminants and the telltale residue of heat. It helps that their quarry doesn't seem to be in any particular hurry. Potato-man keeps his throttle only halfway open, and it isn't long before they pull him back into view. At that point they match his speed, satisfied to keep watch. Who he might be is again the central question. They massage the possibilities separately, following their talents and expectations. In the meantime, islands are passed. Brightly colored vacation homes sit in forests of tailored trees, matching boathouses down by the water and pets like malamutes and emus and dwarf mammoths playing together on the shady lawns. But the man on the waterski continues on a line that will eventually take him into open water, and that course begs another question worth chasing: Where is he going?

In the end, a list of possible identities is drawn up. The boyfriend has five names, the girlfriend seven. But their rationale is identical. There are modern myths about souls like this: Exceptionally wealthy and powerful and farsighted souls who should be known to everyone, but at the same time have kept themselves removed from public view. According to self-styled experts, these Special Ones can eat mashed potatoes in the midst of their peers, yet they have an astonishing, nearly supernatural capacity not to exist. Armies of AIs are responsible for their anonymity, guarding an elaborate, many-layered privacy with tools that even clever young people can only imagine. But the myth claims even more: That this handful of shy souls maintains its privacy not for privacy's sake, but for the power that it affords. Invisible to the world, the Special Ones enjoy freedoms that presidents and corporate masters can't possibly know. Their decrees go unheard, which is why nobody notices the effects. And their long thoughtful silences won't panic Washington or Wall Street. Unlike every other notable citizen, they have the freedom to do nothing if nothing is best, and no one takes note, and their irresistible powers won't fade like muscles never used.

"It has to be one of them," she declares.

He isn't quite as certain, mentioning as much.

She takes offense. Bristling, she claims, "There's no other explanation, darling. No other suspects. It's one of the seven, and I think it's my first candidate. I don't know why, but I do."

"But he's dead," the boyfriend pointed out.

"Reportedly dead for eight years, and a century old if he isn't. But you know what they're doing today with stem cells and artificial colons. Why couldn't our friend be a twentieth century billionaire?"

First of all, Potato-man isn't their friend. But he doesn't say that or anything else that will provide easy ammunition.

Then she straightens up, leaning forward into the boat-made wind. "What island is that?" she asks.

His glasses reach the horizon, finding a dark smudge that quickly becomes land and woods and a thin warm haze.

"Look at the maps," she presses. "Do you see it anywhere?"

According to every available source, including digitals from a multitude of orbiting vistas, what waits before them is nothing but cold water and fat, delicious lake trout.

"This is scary," she declares, laughing nervously.

This is scary and wrong, and again, he wants to retreat. But she opens the throttle, lifting their pace until they are quickly closing on the waterski. Yet their quarry

doesn't seem to notice, bearing straight toward a coastline that shouldn't exist. There are no buildings on the island, or a dock. And suddenly there isn't any stranger to be seen, either.

"The bastard's vanished," she announces.

Into the wind, he begs, "Turn around."

Again, she laughs loudly, nervously. But the hands show no sign of adjusting their course.

He stands in front of her, making certain that she has no choice but to pay attention. "Maybe we've been fooled," he says. "Like you fooled the others. Maybe he didn't exist in the first place."

"That isn't possible," she maintains. "I know how it's done, and this wasn't faked."

"Someone has a bigger, better trick," he argues.

But that thrills her even more. She giggles and begs all of the power out of the engines, and as they slide across the last open water, she screams to be heard. "Then it's a trick worth learning, and that's what I'll ask him first."

The land rises and darkens even more, and at the last moment she cuts the engines, allowing their momentum to carry them into shore. Then she shoves aside the silence, asking, "What's your first question going to be?"

He stares at the woods and the low waves lazily beating against oddly shaped rocks.

For the first time today, she speaks his name.

"Troy," she says.

Turning toward her, he says, "Kora," for the final time. Then in despair, he asks, "What kinds of trees are those? Do you know the species?"

She looks. She says, "No."

"Do you hear that bird singing?"

"It's not in any database," she gushes.

"I can't find it either," he admits. Then he turns forward, and with a shaking voice exclaims, "I don't recognize anything here. None of it! So please! Turn this boat around, please. . . !"

But she refuses. Or maybe she tries to turn the wheel but the boat refuses, and because of her pernicious need to appear in control, she tells him, "No," with a flat, certain voice. Then the bow hits a submerged rock, and she breathes twice, deeply, before saying, "No," once again.

The shoreline is built from pale blue stones, crenulated, composed of unrepeating patterns, each slice of the whole rich with minuscule details. Mosses of different colors and endless textures inhabit every crevice. Insects barely bigger than dust motes patrol the ridges and tiny peaks. Sitting on the bow, he focuses his portal-glasses on this slender edge and that nameless pit, and what astonishes him more than his total ignorance of the species is that no piece of the terrain seems the same as any other. Whatever this place, novelty is rich, relentless. Effortless.

His heart thunders in response, and he trembles, a rich salty sweat pushing out of his panicked body.

He promises himself not to abandon the boat.

But she does, in one long sloppy bound, and with an arm sweeping through the air, she says, "Every tree is different. Did you notice?"

He did, yes. And they aren't just a little bit different, as you'd see in a tropical rainforest. The texture and color of the bark varies, and the design of each tree's leaves is different, and the size and proportions and colors of the flowers that do or don't weigh down their limbs . . . well, this is forest seemingly designed by a thousand remote gods, each weaving its own ideal tree from genius and caprice.

"Are you coming?" she asks.

Grudgingly, yes. But he takes the trouble to wrap one of the boat's lines around a tall purple thumb of stone.

"Our man's close," she promises.

He agrees, though why that should be is just another puzzle.

Climbing away from the shoreline, the girlfriend seems full of decisive curiosity. But her courage vanishes at the edge of the mysterious forest. Maybe the oddities piled upon wonders wear her down. Whatever the reason, Kora is the one who acts suddenly unsure. Staring at her feet, she mutters, "I don't know."

Neither does he. But he senses an advantage, rare and ripe. "This way," he declares, pushing into the shadows.

A flock of birdish creatures flies away, each one dressed in its own florid colors, but screaming with the same panicked voice.

Novelty proves exhausting. The mind leaps and sputters, trying to digest this unpredictable environment. But at least the terror proves bearable, and with practice even that begins to fade. Never a man to notice odors, he nonetheless finds himself drinking down perfumes and rich earthy odors and lost farts and warning stinks from creatures too scared to show themselves. He walks faster, and then he runs, and she calls to him from behind and then from farther behind, using a plaintive tone that he has never heard before when she begs, "Darling, wait."

He slows.

At a sprint, she collides with his back.

Then they stand motionless, the island's low summit beneath their feet. Behind them lies their shoreline; ahead wait louder waves. She takes his arm in hers, and together, as one, they push ahead.

Who would have imagined that ignorance would feel divine and mesmerizing? But of course in a world where AIs are plentiful and databases thorough, the capacity to utterly surprise a person might prove relatively impressive, and enhancing the senses on top of that . . . well, this is exactly the kind of magic sure to become the next drug of choice.

Leaving the trees, passing into the open again, they discover the sun standing at an unexpected angle. Water reaches to the horizon and probably long beyond. This new sea looks deep and smells brackish. But at least one feature is familiar enough to give comfort. Novelty lies everywhere but in the man standing on the beach, his old boots enduring the sweeping waters, hands on hips and no glasses on his face, but a jaunty smile ready to greet whoever emerges from what has to be his private woods.

Kora offers the name of her favorite candidate, adding, "Sir," and then, "Hello."

The stranger says nothing.

Troy decides on different tactics. Into the hard wind, he says, "I don't care who you are. But I think you want something from us."

The stranger considers speaking but decides otherwise.

Kora jumps on that possibility. "You want to hire us," she guesses. "That's why you were at the restaurant. And why you lured us here . . . wherever 'here' is . . ."

"Here," the stranger says, "is the only place of worth."

They are stunned, mute and utterly thrilled.

"Don't use names," he continues, his voice a little higher and rather less impressive than his handsome face implied. "You guessed it already, or you didn't. Either way, you've wasted your energies."

She grabs her boyfriend's hand, and he squeezes it gratefully.

"Energy is always limited. Always finite. That's the nature of the universe, and thinking otherwise is to embrace sloth and waste and your imagined importance."



They sag against each other, their bodies familiar, reassuring.

"You have no importance," the stranger assures.

Each wants to say otherwise; but nothing left inside them is brazen enough to argue their case.

"But," he adds, "you do show me a small measure of promise."

Weak smiles surface, and the girlfriend says, "I knew it. You want us."

But as those words are offered, the man frowns, shaking his head slowly, the long hair brushing against his broad shoulders.

"Not 'us,'" he warns.

Their hands grip harder, but now they lean away from one another.

"What I want—what I offer today and only today—is the opportunity to serve, to become one part of the ultimate cause. But my interest extends only to one of you."

"Which one?" Troy asks.

Silence.

"How do we know which?" he demands.

The nameless man stares at them for a long while, never blinking. Then after what seems like an interminable delay, he says, "Both of you know precisely who I want."

As if being burnt, their shared hands let go.

Then each turns to face the other, and with a tight happy voice, Kora asks, "What else?"

"You think there's more?" the stranger replies.

Troy believes it too, yes.

"Very well," they hear. "One of you will come with me. But the cost of admission involves leaving the other behind. And when I talk about abandonment, I mean that it will happen in the most profound and eternal way."

The girlfriend is a thief, and possibly worse. That has always been part of the attraction and the heart of Troy's deepest worries. There have been days when he believes that he loves her and always will, but she always finds some way to ruin his affections, spoiling his warm feeling. A piece of her is evil. For instance, she will always dismiss the kindness of others. Weakness and charity are the same words to her. How many times has she implied as much? What matters to Kora is Kora. Oth-

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ers exist only to help her, or they are enemies to be outwitted and left crumbled by the road. She is competitive and tenacious and scary, and Troy finds himself remembering cruel suggestions offered casually, as well as queenly pities for the ignorant masses that will never be half as brilliant as she is.

An awful question poses itself.

He looks at the girl's face as she drops her gaze. Between them is a gray-blue stone set on top of the other stones, its sharpest edge glinting in the unworldly sun. She looks at the stone. He can guess what she is thinking. "How do I prove that I'm the one?" she asks herself. And in that instant, with remarkably little effort, a difficult decision has been made.

But he refuses to act.

Watching her, he wishes for a sign that will tell him that he's wrong, that she is a little less awful than what he fears. But then her right hand flinches, wanting to reach for something, and what choice remains?

He kneels quickly.

She says, "Troy."

He grabs the stone, slicing open his palm before turning the edge to face her. Then he strikes her, just once and not particularly hard, leaving a narrow neat slice in her forearm. And that's when he hesitates, scared to do anything else. He feels powerless, his mind searching for any thought that will lend resolution. She has always mocked him for his lack of courage, his tentative calculating ways. Memories make him angry, but what helps most is to try and imagine the world she would invent, if allowed. Yes, that's the way to think about it. Disconnected images come to mind—visions of a nightmarish place—and that's how Troy assures himself that this is the right and proper course.

She stands her ground, numbly staring at the fresh wound.

Then with a sudden sense of purpose, Troy knocks that wiry little body off its feet and kneels over it, cutting away the throat before she manages to say his name again.

She bleeds, and bleeds.

He is panting and sorry, but what else was possible? This is best. In one fashion or another, this kind of ending was inevitable—if not through him, then some other force of Right—and he stands up again and looks at the man in the surf, thrilled to see a narrow smile and an unblinking nod of approval.

Then the girl sits up and says, "Troy," despite the gore and the chopped-apart larynx. "Why did you do this?"

He looks at the dying woman, too astonished to react.

"I wouldn't have done this to you," she claims.

But she would have, wouldn't she?

"Never," she promises.

He drops to his knees.

Every wound has been healed, or they never were. She stands easily and joins the other man, and the man tells Troy, "This is a bigger place than you've guessed. If you're smart, you can make a respectable life for yourself here."

The stolen fishing boat has appeared on the shoreline.

As Kora steps onboard, Troy shouts out, "You'll come back for me someday. Won't you?"

She looks at him, her gaze furious. Cold.

"It's your head," she reminds him. "You can put whatever thoughts you want inside it." O

Once April finds out the truth about her son, she may never again have . . .

# AN ORDINARY DAY WITH JASON

Kate Wilhelm

**B**efore we were married Vernon told me about the family trait that he feared would be so off-putting that I would tell him to get lost. We were in bed on Sunday night, where we had been most of the time since Friday. We were eating stale popcorn, the only food left in my apartment. On Friday we had planned a dinner out and a movie, but the rain had turned to freezing rain mixed with snow.

We made the final commitment that weekend. And he told me. It came up in the most innocuous way.

"Honey," he said, "did you have an imaginary friend when you were a kid?"

"Sure. Her name was Doris. She had red hair in pigtails and a lot of freckles. She was dumber than I was."

"What happened to her?" he asked.

"I guess she went where imaginary friends go when they're no longer needed. Out of awareness, out of mind."

"Did anyone else ever see her?"

I helped myself to more popcorn. It really wasn't that bad. "Of course not. What are you getting at?"

"Humor me," he said.

He was leaning on his elbow watching me, strangely serious, considering that both of us were naked, covers drawn up to our chins because the apartment was cold, and a bowl of stale popcorn was balanced on my stomach.

"Okay. I'm humoring you. No one else ever saw Doris. Now it's your turn. Tell me about your imaginary friend."

"One more question first," he said. "What if someone else had seen her? More than one saw her?"

I shook my head. "Then she wouldn't have been imaginary. And it would have freaked me out when she went away."

He had yet another question. "Did you know Doris was a product of your imagination?"

I had to stop and think about that. Finally I had to admit that I wasn't sure, but I didn't think so.

"You said one more question," I said then. "You're over the limit. Just tell me where you're going with this. Is it something about your imaginary friend?"

"Yeah," he said. He took some popcorn, more, I thought, to buy a little time than because he wanted it.

"Suppose an imaginary friend isn't always a playmate. Not a Calvin and Hobbes situation, or Christopher and Pooh, and not a redheaded Doris. Suppose it's an object."

"Okay. A stretch, but I'm supposing. Your friend was a little unusual. Then what?"

"Suppose it's a staircase," he said slowly.

I couldn't help it. I laughed and nearly choked on popcorn, and I upset the bowl. When I could speak, I said, "Your imaginary friend was a staircase?"

He nodded, and I laughed harder until he had to pound me on the back for fear I would really choke.

We had to get up, of course. You can't roll around on a bed strewn with buttered popcorn and salt. There was more that came out in bits and pieces that night.

Vernon had had the ability, or whatever it can be called, to project, conjure, imagine, do something, and make a staircase appear, one that anyone else in the room could also see. It stopped when he was six or seven, the way Doris stopped appearing to me at about that age. His father had done the same thing. Not every generation did it, he said that night, sometimes it skipped, but it always returned, possibly as far back as when the ancestors were leaving the trees and opting for houses with indoor plumbing.

I didn't believe a word of it. But it came to pass. What a useful phrase, one that should not be discarded or scorned. Jason's first staircase appeared when he was three, while we were still in a New York apartment.

I was reading a magazine article and Jason was playing with blocks and a truck that he crashed into the blocks over and over with a cry of, "Whoosh!" I glanced up from the magazine when he became still, and there it was, a fully formed staircase, with a banister. Except for the fact that it ended where the wall met the ceiling, it looked exactly the way a staircase would look in any house with an upstairs.

I screamed, "Vernon!" and I grabbed Jason and held him against me as hard as I could as I backed away from the apparition all the way to the wall.

Vernon ran in, looking as frightened as I was. He saw the staircase and said, "We don't have an upstairs." The staircase vanished.

Jason reacted to my terror and began to cry, and I was shaking. After Vernon got us both calmed down again, and Jason resumed his play, Vernon said, "Honey, it doesn't do anything. It's just there. All you have to do is say we don't have an upstairs and it's gone."

He stayed close to us the rest of the afternoon, but we didn't talk about it until Jason was in bed. "April," he said earnestly that night, "there's nothing dangerous about it. He doesn't have a psychological problem any more than I did, or than Dad did. He'll outgrow it, exactly the way I did, the way you outgrew Doris."

"But it will freak out anyone who suddenly sees a staircase appear," I said. "And someone will."

He shook his head. "It just happens in rooms, in closed-in places, never outside. We'll move to a warmer place where he can spend more time outside. We'll home school him until he outgrows it, and avoid house guests for the next few years. Can you cope with that? Is it asking too much?"

I had no answer, and he put his arms around me and drew me closer to him. "Honey, Dad's okay, as you well know, and I seem to be okay. No lasting effect, no damage. Just a few somewhat irregular years ahead, and it's over. Please, April, try to see it that way."

I had to admit that he was more than okay. He writes elegant articles for magazines like *The National Geographic* and *Archeology Review*. Anthropological discoveries, architectural wonders, basket weaving in Bolivia, dances in Tibet, things like that, and they are always well received, as are his photographs. And Dad, his father,

is the owner of a prestigious horse breeding farm, his horses prized and ridden by royalty, he boasts. He claims that he made very little money from it, and Vernon explained that it's true, because he has practically an army of workers on the farm, managers, trainers, farm workers, and so on.

That night Dad joined us, and between them they made it sound very simple, almost commonplace. When the staircase appeared, I could make it disappear by saying we don't have an upstairs. We should not make an issue of it with Jason, who seemed unaware of it. And Dad would find us a house as soon as possible where Jason could spend a lot of time outside. Also, Dad would spend more time with us, and with three of us no one person would be burdened by being watchful at all times. We especially should not let Jason realize there was anything weird about stairs that appeared and vanished. It was just another part of the mysterious world he found himself in.

Dad found the house we're living in now, a few miles from Roanoke, in an affluent subdivision with two sections, A and B. The A section is completed and most of the houses there are occupied. The B section is mostly empty lots with only three complete houses. Two on the far end, and ours. Apparently the developer ran out of money, couldn't get credit, lost interest or something, and Dad was able to get a good deal on a lease for this house.

Across the street from our house is a park with a clubhouse, a large children's playground, a wading pool, and a covered pavilion. In our own fenced back yard we have a whole playground, swing, sliding board, a jungle gym to climb, and a sandbox.

Jason is enraptured by trucks, and has a fleet of ten or twelve that he plays with in the kitchen when I'm busy there. If there's a pause in the roars, the whooshes and crashing sounds, I'm quick to glance around and say the magic words if necessary. "We don't have an upstairs." The roars and whooshes and crashes resume and all is well.

My ordinary days might strike others as extraordinary, but I've found that anything that you get used to takes on the cloak of ordinariness rather quickly.

We all share household chores, and Dad's available as a babysitter when he's at our house. Vernon and I go to the movies, have dinner out now and then, and there's bus service nearby to a big mall and also to downtown Roanoke. I know why both Vernon and Dad want to make my life as easy as possible. Vernon's mother abandoned them when he was four, and Vernon's desperately afraid I might decide to go back to my old job in New York. Not a chance. I worked for a soulless insurance company. Besides, I love him too much to think of leaving. I think his mother was a twit who probably ran off with the UPS man.

Most mornings Jason and I go to the park and playground, where I read or chat with other adults and Jason romps and plays with other children. We get back to the house in time for lunch and then a nap for Jason.

The day everything changed, we arrived back home and saw two men talking to Dad in the living room. They were both wearing dark suits, and my first thought was missionaries.

That day, with the strangers in the house, I hurried Jason past the open arch to the living room and on to the kitchen. I was fixing his lunch when Dad entered.

"Insurance salesmen," I said. "Missionaries."

"Nope. Researchers. They're studying memory loss and drafted me to be one of their subjects."

I stopped cutting up an apple. "What do you mean, drafted you?"

"It seems," he said, "they're into a study of a new drug to arrest memory loss. It starts at an early age, but after about sixty it speeds up. They want people from sixty to sixty-five to participate in a fifteen-year study to see if the stuff works. They enrolled a couple of guys at the clubhouse, and someone mentioned that I was sixty-

two, and they came after me to add to the study. They give tests now and then to see what's going on. They'll be back the day after tomorrow to give me the first test before the stuff has had time to take effect."

"Dad, please don't tell me you've agreed, that you let two strangers give you a drug without checking them out thoroughly first. Please tell me you didn't do that."

"April," he said, "they showed me their credentials. They're medical researchers."

I called Vernon out from his study. "Tell him what you just told me," I said to Dad.

"Well," he said in a very deliberate way, after he retold it, "I said they gave me the drug, but I didn't say I swallowed it. Now did I? See?" He fished in his pocket and came up with a little white pill.

"We don't have an upstairs," Vernon said in a loud voice then, and I didn't even bother to turn to see the staircase before it vanished.

"Brain drain dudes," Jason said. "Brain drain dudes."

Vernon rolled his eyes and I said helplessly, "Some of the older kids at the playground. He's picking up a lot of words there."

Dad held the pill in the palm of his hand and regarded it thoughtfully. "Funny thing," he said. "I'm sure I never mentioned to anyone how old I am."

We were all looking at the pill, and Vernon said in a strained voice, "Dad, I think you'd better put that in something."

The pill in Dad's hand was changing—there were tiny thread-like wisps emerging on one side. Dad touched it gingerly with his fingertip, enough to roll it a bit, and the threads vanished.

"I think you're right," Dad said. Vernon got a plastic baggie out and Dad let the pill fall into it. He zipped the baggie closed. He tilted his head slightly in the direction of Vernon's study and said to me, "I guess we'd better let you get on with giving Jason his lunch." They walked out of the kitchen, down the hallway to the study, entered and closed the door behind them.

It seemed to take forever to get Jason to eat, then to read him a story and tuck him in for a nap. The staircase never appeared while he was in bed, and I was free as soon as he was bedded down. I hurried to the study. No one was there.

They could have gone out without passing through the kitchen, and evidently that's what they had done, and I was furious. A pill that grows and retracts tendrils, strange men passing out pseudo drugs, appearing and disappearing staircases, suddenly it was all too much. At that moment if the UPS man had come knocking, I would have been tempted to get in his brown truck and go wherever he was going.

Dad's car was still in the driveway and our car, Vernon's and mine, was still in the garage, so they couldn't have gone far. Sometimes when Vernon was stuck on an article he went for long walks through our half of the subdivision, and I decided that was what they were up to.

Walking, talking, leaving me out of it altogether, whatever *it* was. Thinking about it only made me angrier. Then I heard a dog barking and Vernon came into the living room where I was and he was leading a dog on a leash.

I sank down onto the sofa and closed my eyes for a moment. They were both still there when I opened them again. "Where did that come from?" I asked.

"Pet store," he said. "Cute, isn't he? He's a cocker spaniel."

"Vernon, I may be losing my mind," I said carefully. "Would you like to explain anything to me? Anything at all before I start screaming."

The dog had black and white spotted long fur, with the requisite oversized silky ears, big soulful eyes, a plume of a tail that was wagging his whole body at the moment.

Vernon sat down next to me and unleashed the dog. He began to run around the room sniffing everything, including me.

"He's for Jason," Vernon said. "He's housebroken, not quite two years old and an-



swers to the name of Spotty." He took a rubber ball from his pocket and held it up, as if to prove a point.

"What in God's name is going on here?" I demanded, and heard my voice rising before I even thought of yelling.

Vernon took my hand. "April, please believe this," he said. "I never meant to deceive you, lie to you, but there are a few things I didn't mention before. I was afraid to," he said, and he sounded sincere, abject even. "I was afraid I'd lose you," he added in a low voice. "I love you so much it scared me, thinking that I might lose you."

It's hard to stay mad at a man who sounds like that and says that, but I did. "So, what lies, what deceit? How did you get that dog home from a pet store? Both cars were here! Where's Dad, and why did those men come and give him a pill that puts out tendrils?"

I would have gone on, but he put his hand on my mouth and said in an agonized voice, "I've been a fool and I'm sorry. Please promise you'll hear me out before you say anything else."

I nodded and he removed his hand. "That night, when I told you about our family, it was clear that you didn't believe me," he said, holding my hand. "I should have told the rest, but . . . Anyway, I didn't. He'll outgrow it at about six or seven, that's true. But not forever," he said. I yanked my hand loose. "Just hear me out," he said again and I put both clenched hands in my lap, prepared to listen before I lit into him.

"When I reached puberty," he said, "I began seeing the staircase again, and I knew I was doing it myself. Dad knew it was happening almost as soon as I did. He . . . he educated me. I had to learn how to use the stairs."

I shook my head. "What do you mean, learn how to use the stairs?"

"They're real, April," he said.

He talked until Jason woke up and went crazy excited when he saw the dog. It was love at first sight, both ways. After he was dressed, he and Spotty went to play ball in the back yard, and Vernon and I sat on the patio where he finished telling me.

The stairs are real and Jason has no idea where they lead or that he's responsible for them. He can't be allowed to go up them or even suspect how real they are. He'll have to be taught how to use them when he reaches puberty, and Vernon and Dad will be his teachers. The stairs will end up wherever he decides he wants to be, but first he has to know exactly where that is. After he has learned his lessons thoroughly he will no longer need the stairs to go wherever he wants to be.

At about that point I suddenly craved a long tall gin and anything. Or perhaps straight gin. And I seldom drink anything alcoholic.

"Vernon," I said, sitting on a sunny patio in a subdivision near Roanoke, Virginia, watching my child play with his dog, so typically mid-American, it was right out of Norman Rockwell, "you're telling me that both you and your father can teleport. And that my son will be able to do it too as soon as he's old enough." My words were spaced as if I had already had that long tall glass of straight gin.

Vernon nodded.

His biographical sketches always make a big deal of the fact that he was graduated from high school at the age of sixteen and that for the next six years his father took him traveling. Exotic places, cities in just about every country anyone ever heard of, villages that no one ever heard of, places so remote they had never been mentioned in any tourist guide.

I thought of the articles he had written, the places he had been, and I said, "Those years, you didn't bother with airplanes? Is that right? You just went there?"

He nodded again.

I thought of all the photographs he had accumulated during those years, he had always said. Most of those pictures were digitized, and few of them had negatives,

which some publishers wanted more than the prints. "You're still going to those places, aren't you? To take pictures with your digital camera."

He nodded.

I began to think about Dad's stash of wine, which he likes with his dinner every day. I stood up and said, "I'm going to get drunk now." I went inside to start, and he remained on the patio looking miserable, watching our son play with his new dog.

I didn't believe him, I decided, but that was a lie. I hadn't believed it about Jason, either, until proven. Dad had a big assortment of wine, completely unfamiliar to me, but a five dollar bottle or fifty-dollar bottle meant nothing. I opened a red wine and poured a lot into a water glass and took a drink, and then I sat down in the kitchen and the questions began piling up. Where was Dad? Why the dog all at once? Who were those men and what were they after? The list got longer and I began to make notes. In a little while Vernon came in and sat at the table, and I started down the list.

"He's in Tennessee," Vernon said. "He'll be back soon. We're going to give the dog the pill. We think it's a tracking device or something like it, that it embeds itself, the covering dissolves, and it lets them keep track of a person's whereabouts. About a month ago Dad attended a horse auction that turned out to be by invitation only, with tight security. The owner of the horses is a competitor and he spotted Dad and called security. Of course, Dad got the hell out of there, but the security firm was alarmed. Apparently it happened at least one other time. Anyway, we suspect that they are trying to find out how he shows up in places where they are responsible for security. Their reputation is at stake. They want to keep track of him and his possible contacts if we're right about the pill."

He said that some of his ancestors had been tried as witches, that one had been burned at the stake, and another one imprisoned. Since no prison could hold any of them, he had left and headed west, where he vanished. They, the family, had kept as much of the past a secret as possible—one reason for the big farm in Tennessee, where they had isolation to a point and felt safe. But, he added a bit lamely, a really good investigation might uncover some other events that were not easily explained. I assumed he referred to some of his own travels.

"Why did Dad go to Tennessee now? What's he up to?"

"He wants to make sure the house is ready for all of us if we decide it's time to go there," he said reluctantly. "Only if we think it's necessary," he added, when I shook my head.

"Why would it be necessary?" I demanded. "What else are you leaving out?"

He got up and poured himself a glass of wine, returned, and we both took long drinks. "Dad's afraid he might have to take off for a while," he said. "He doesn't want to leave you and Jason with just me. It's too hard for you. The farm is safe, a one story house, big and comfortable, with some very loyal employees who accept that the family is a little peculiar. He can come and go there easily. No one can sneak up on him, or slip something into his pocket, keep him under surveillance all the time."

"So the dog will have the embedded tracking thing," I said after another drink of wine. It was getting better. I might take it up with dinner, too. "They'll think Dad is at home most of the time while he's free to go wherever he wants to. And so are you."

Vernon nodded. He was turning into a regular bobblehead, I thought and giggled.

"I need a little time," I said then. "This is all too much for one sitting. I'm going to take a walk."

He nodded.

I walked through the empty subdivision, and even got a little lost a time or two. The streets all wind about, change their names in a capricious manner, and there are few landmarks. But I did need to walk and think. It was crazy, but that didn't mean it was untrue. I could well understand why it had to be kept a closely guarded secret.

What a prize they would be to a research neurologist. Not just a scientific goldmine, but for corporations, the military . . . Geneticists would go crazy over them. Isolate the gene or genes responsible, and go on from there. To what end? Too many possibilities to contemplate.

One thought persisted regardless of how many others swam to the surface. I had to protect Jason. Little else mattered. If the farm was the best place to do that, we'd move to the farm. Vernon had grown up there, and he had been safe there. I suspected that we lived in the leased house instead of the farm because that's where Vernon lived when his mother took off. He was afraid I'd get lonely or something. But I had already decided she was a twit. That was not a consideration. Jason's safety was.

Our house unexpectedly came into sight and I went home.

Vernon and Dad were both vastly relieved when I told them I agreed that we should move to the farm as soon as possible. Dad had been moving his belongings most of the day, and they both worked well into the night taking things they didn't want movers to handle. We should keep everything as normal appearing as we could, Vernon said that night, not raise any suspicions, and that meant that I should follow my usual routine, keep going to the park and playground and so on. He would arrange for a moving company to come and pack up whatever was left, and ship it. The brain drain dudes would be back the day after tomorrow in the afternoon between two and three, and Dad would handle them. He would make sure that Spotty was nearby when they arrived, he said. He suspected they wanted to test the tracking device.

We followed that scenario, and the next day was ordinary. The staircase appeared several times and I sent it away. Jason played with his new dog, and things kept disappearing. Dad's wine collection vanished. Most of Vernon's records, his CDs and DVDs, files, magazines that featured his articles . . .

On the next day when we got home from the park, it was in time to see a car stop at the curb in front of our house, and the two men in suits get out and start up our sidewalk. They paused when I crossed the street holding Jason's hand.

"We're a little early," one of them said, "but we'd like to see the senior Mr. Branleigh." He smiled an insurance salesman smile.

"I'll see if he's home," I said, unlocking the door, keeping a good grip on Jason's hand. I realized that if the tracking device worked, they believed Dad was there. A spasm of fear tightened my insides. They followed me into the foyer. "Please wait here a minute. Jason, why don't you go play with Spotty while I fix lunch?"

He was interested in the two men in suits, looking them over soberly, and I had to pull him along with me to the kitchen. Spotty started to bark and Jason ran out to roll on the ground with him.

I glanced inside Vernon's study, and went on to Dad's room, where I knocked on the door although I knew he wasn't there. Those men weren't expected until later and he was busy. But I went through the motions.

When I returned to the foyer, I gasped. The staircase was there and the men in suits were gone. I said the magic words, but they had lost their magic. Jason had to hear it, I remembered, and ran to the back door and out. Jason was sitting on his swing, talking to Spotty, who was watching him. I said the words again, loud enough for him to hear me. He didn't look up or indicate that he had heard, but he seldom did. I ran back to the foyer. The staircase was gone. And the men in suits? Where had they gone?

I was getting more and more nervous. When Jason was finally in bed for his nap, I had to make myself stop going to the foyer to make sure the staircase was gone, that the men in suits were really gone. The car remained at the curb. At last Dad appeared. I almost knocked him down in my rush to get to him before he left again and I was nearly incoherent when I told him what happened.

"Calm down," he kept saying, as he patted my arm. "We'll figure out what to do."

Vernon came soon after that and I let Dad tell him. He turned pale. "Does Jason know? Did he see it happen?"

"No! He ran out to play with Spotty. What difference—" I stopped myself. "Oh, my God! Your mother! Is that what happened to your mother?"

Dad answered. "He didn't see it, either. He didn't know. And we don't know for sure, but it's the most likely thing."

Vernon rubbed his eyes and went to the sink where he stood with his back to us. Dad looked deeply troubled as he said, "I told her they were real, what you could do with them. I warned her not to go near, but . . ."

The forbidden door in Bluebeard's castle came to mind, and I understood why Vernon had not told me until the issue was forced.

No one spoke for a minute or two, until Vernon swung around from the sink and said, "Dad, you have to go to the mall and buy something, anything, and then come home on the bus, and get here before two-thirty. I'll go to the library, and get home by four, also by bus. April, it's going to be up to you to carry this off. Can you do it?"

I nodded. Anything, I would do anything to get us out of this. How to explain two agents of some kind vanishing in our house?

They both left soon after that, and after half an hour I called the police. "Please send someone," I pleaded, all raw nerves again. "I'm alone with a small child, and I'm afraid. Please."

It took about ten minutes for two uniformed officers to get there. I met them at the door and was talking before they got all the way inside.

"We were at the park, my little boy and I were. That car was there when we got home, and it's still there. Where is the driver? Why is it there? I keep thinking I hear someone at a window or something."

"Now, Mrs. Branleigh, take it easy. We'll have a look around. Why don't you have a cup of coffee or tea or something?" the older one said with a comforting smile. "I'm sure there's nothing to be alarmed about."

I didn't have to fake a thing. I was shaking and ready to fly apart. I sat at the kitchen table while they had their look around. They asked if they could have a look around inside and I nodded. "Don't wake up Jason."

When they came back the older one took out a notebook and asked a few questions. My husband, I said, was at the library in Roanoke doing some research. And my father-in-law had gone to the mall, and would be back any minute. Some people were supposed to meet with him between two and three.

"I thought it was those men when I saw the car, but they were too early, and no one came to the door. Jason will be up any minute now and I'm afraid."

"Well, no one's around, so you can relax. No basement here?" he asked and I shook my head. And no upstairs, either, I nearly added.

He turned to his companion, who had not said a word. "Call in the license number, see if we have anything on it." The other one nodded and left, passing Dad at the door. Dad hurried into the kitchen. He was carrying a bag from Penney's.

"What's going on? Why are you here?" he asked the officer.

"Is there someplace where we can talk?" the officer asked. Dad took him to the living room.

As soon as Jason was up and dressed we went outside. I sat on the patio with a cup of coffee and he played ball with Spotty. I did not want Jason to see the uniformed police officers and I most certainly did not want him to blurt out that the brain drain dudes had been there.

The police left, but we knew it wasn't over yet. Others would come and ask questions. The best we could hope for was that the men in suits were from the private security company, and Dad would simply deny that he had been in California that

year. His word against Styvesant's, he said. "And," he added, "Styvesant is no better than a horse thief. He puts nags up for auction. Let them prove it."

A tow truck came and removed the car and two private detectives came. Vernon let them search the house and yard. They even looked on the roof. And they searched the park and the clubhouse, and no doubt talked to residents of the other section of the subdivision, including a couple who had seen Dad and Vernon on the bus that day. No government official came to ask questions, to our great relief.

The plan is for all of us to use the stairs to go to the farm, and to leave as soon as Jason is sound asleep. Dad will carry Jason, who is not likely to wake up. Vernon will have a big suitcase, enough to do us until the movers bring the rest of our things, and I'll have a smaller suitcase. The last thing I put in the suitcase was Jason's new favorite book, *Where the Wild Things Are*. I wonder if that's where the two men in suits ended up, with the wild things.

Dad will come back with Vernon, and he will drive to the farm overnight with Spotty. We will say he drove Jason and me, but it's too long a trip for Jason, who would need a bathroom break. Also, there's the possibility that we could be stopped somewhere. We want whoever hired those agents to believe that Dad is at the farm, and if they keep tabs on him, that's where they will locate the tracking device for the next ten years or longer. Vernon will wait for the movers, and then drive our car to the farm.

And I have a plan of my own that I haven't mentioned yet. But I will. If Vernon thinks he can flit off now and then to exotic places and take pictures while I sit at home, he's in for a surprise. From now on he will have a companion and Dad will be our babysitter.

"Ready?" Vernon asks, taking my hand.

I nod. The staircase is only four or five steps this time, and it's for my benefit since I can't teleport, but although anyone can climb the stairs, only the conjuror can decide where they end up. Vernon will keep a good grip on my hand so we'll all end up at the same place. We start up the staircase. ○

## SMALL CONQUERORS

Who saw the menace? mice were just so cute  
riding with sharpened lance to challenge cats  
when first they forged a mouse-made armor suit  
and rode with painted banners on armored rats.

When mice discovered guns we worried more  
soon rodent Einsteins found the atom bomb  
and rodent armies learned the arts of war  
to start upon their human-race pogrom.

Mouse armies swarm, an angry furry tide  
we thought ourselves, once, nature's best and last  
from hordes of mice, there's just no place to hide  
now we flee creatures small and smart and fast.

So here's the lesson: we may be on top  
but evolution doesn't stop.

—Geoffrey A. Landis



# ATOMIC TRUTH

Chris Beckett

Chris Beckett lives in Cambridge, England, with his wife Maggie, his youngest daughter Nancy, and sundry furry animals. His first short story was published in the UK in 1990 in *Interzone*, which has since published twenty more. The author's US appearances have included: four previous tales in *Asimov's*, six stories in "year's best" collections, his first novel *The Holy Machine* (Wildside, 2004)—described here as "a triumph" by Paul Di Filippo—and, most recently, his second novel, *Marcher* (Cosmos Books). Chris's short story collection *The Turing Test*, which includes three tales first seen in *Asimov's*, was published last summer by Elastic Press. His latest *Asimov's* story takes a look at a social condition that isn't necessarily all that far away.

Jenny Philips emerged from the revolving doors of Rigby, Rigby, & Stile into the dirty drizzle and the glistening lights of a London November night. It was a Friday and she'd been working late, clearing her desk in preparation for a week's leave. This time tomorrow she and Ben would be in Jamaica, dining under palm trees and stars.

She badly wanted to call him now, to make some kind of contact. But she knew he was busy wrapping things up at *his* work and he'd quite specifically told her he didn't want to be disturbed until he was done. Ben could get quite cross about things like that. He'd promised to call her as soon as he was through and she'd have to be content with that.

Jenny looked up and down the busy street, judging the severity of the rain, turning up her collar, opening her pink umbrella and then, of course, putting on a pair of large hemispherical goggles. She was pretty, smartly dressed, twenty-eight years old, the p.a. to the senior partner in a City law firm. The goggles made her look like a fruit fly but she didn't mind because so did everyone else on the street. Ocular implants were on their way, but there were still unresolved safety issues—a small but unacceptable percentage of laboratory animals were still going blind—and for the moment everyone wore bug eyes.

Or almost everyone. In the burger bar next to Jenny's office, Richard Pegg slid off his stool, pushed a dog-eared notebook into his pocket, zipped up his very large anorak that stretched down almost to his knees and pulled his woolly hat even lower down over his head. He was one of the few people in London under seventy who didn't even own a set of bugs. Even the people who slept in shop doorways had bugs, but Richard still went out into the rainy street with a bare face and naked eyes. The



truth was he didn't need bugs to provide him with phantoms and visions and voices. In fact he had to take pills to keep that stuff at bay.

Richard was twenty-eight, like Jenny, but he'd never had a job. He'd come up to town from his little one-bedroom flat in Surrey for one of his trips round the museums with his notebook and pencils. "Doing research" was what he called it to himself, looking for the hidden meaning of the world among the fossils and the hieroglyphs, the crystals and the cuneiform tablets. He'd filled up another notebook with his dense scrawlings in three different colors about clues and mysteries and conspiracies, full of capitals and underlinings and exclamation marks.

Emerging from the burger bar, Richard too confronted the drizzle and the electric lights: orange, white, green, red, blue. But while Jenny had taken the everyday scene for granted, for him, as ever, it posed an endless regress of troubling questions. What was rain? What were cars? What was electricity? What was this strange thing called space that existed in between one object and the next? What was air? What did those lights mean, what did they *really* mean as they shifted from green to amber to red and back again, over and over again?

Unlike Jenny, he also saw Electric Man. Four meters tall and outlined in white fire, Electric Man towered over the passing people and cars and stared straight at Richard with its light bulb eyes because it knew that he could see it, even if no one else could. Pursing his lips and hunching down into his anorak, Richard avoided its gaze as he headed off towards the station.

"Atomic truth," he muttered to himself, drawing together the fruits of his day's work. "Atomic truth. Hidden by the world's leaders. Hidden *from* the world's leaders because none of them has atomic eyes. They can't see it, not truth in its correct atomic form. Or not as far as I know."

He laughed loudly, opening his gap-toothed mouth. People turned to look at him. He ignored their bug-eyed stares.

"Hi, Sue, it's Jenny!" The slender woman waiting in front of him for the pedestrian crossing sign to change from red to green had taken the opportunity to put through a bug call to one of her friends, an older woman who she used to work with in a previous job. "Ben is too busy to talk and I *had* to phone someone. I'm so excited! But nervous too. Our first holiday together. Do you think it's all going to be all right?"

Thanks to her bug eyes, Jenny could see and hear her friend right in front of her. Richard couldn't see or hear the friend at all, of course, but he gathered up whatever fragments of the conversation that he could and stored them in his mind with the same reverence with which he copied down hieroglyphs in the British Museum. The way people talked to each other, were at ease with one another, the way they shared things and held one another's attention, these were as much a mystery to him as the inscriptions on the mummy cases of pharaohs: a mystery, but like the hieroglyphs, pregnant with mysterious meaning.

"Hi, Sue, it's Jenny!" he muttered.

He laughed. It struck him as funny. And then he tried just repeating the name, "Jenny, Jenny, Jenny."

It had such a sweet sound, that name, such a sweet, sweet sound.

"Jenny, Jenny, Jenny."

Jenny had her bug eyes set at low opacity. She could still see the world that Richard saw—the traffic lights, the taxis, the cars throwing up their fans of brown water, the shops like glowing caves of yellow light—but for her, soothingly, all this was enclosed in a kind of frame. Wearing bug eyes was cozy, like being inside a car. It reduced the city streets to a movie on a screen, a view seen through a window.

Near the bottom of her field of vision—and seemingly in front of her in space—was a toolbar with a row of icons that allowed her to navigate the bug eye system. Near the top of the field there was an “accessories bar” with a clock and a variety of pieces of information of the kind that people find comforting, like the many blades of a Swiss penknife, even if they never use them: things like the air temperature, the Dow-Jones Index, a five-year calendar, the TV highlights of the evening ahead, the local time in Sydney and Hong Kong . . .

Above the accessories bar, advertisements rolled by:

*“Even Detectives Cry*, the powerful new novel from Elgar Winterton, now in bug-book format at Finlay and Barnes for just £2.99. . . . *Froozli*, the great new snack idea from Nezc. Because being healthy needn’t mean doing without . . .”

Of course Jenny wasn’t paying any attention to the ads.

“Ben’s spent so much money on this,” she said to Sue. “You wouldn’t believe it! Jet-skiing, and diving, and rafting, and . . . well, loads of things he’s booked up for us. I keep worrying that he’s done *too* much and that it’s going to be hard to . . . I mean, I keep saying he doesn’t have to . . .”

A young couple passed by in the other direction, arm in arm. Although physically together, thanks to their bugs they were at that moment in entirely different worlds. He was blink-surfing the net. She was chatting animatedly into the air.

Sue regarded her friend Jenny. Bug eyes did not transmit a visual image requiring a camera, but a virtual image in which movement and expression were reconstructed from facial muscle movements. Now Sue’s virtual face regarded her gentle friend Jenny with narrowed, worried eyes.

“Just try and enjoy it, Jenny!” she said. “Grab it while you can and enjoy it!”

She hesitated, wanting to say more, but unable to find quite the right words. She was nine years older than Jenny, and rather tougher.

“Enjoy it, Jenny dear,” she ended up repeating. “It’s not every day you get a trip to Jamaica with everything paid for by someone else.”

Communicating through bug eyes, paradoxically, allowed you to see other people bug eye free. But since he never used bugs himself and since he never entered other people’s homes where folk removed their bugs to watch TV, Richard saw people with bug eyes on most of the time. He inhabited a world of human fruit flies. They saw his naked face and looked away.

“Jenny,” he whispered, “Jenny.”

And he laughed, not mockingly but with delight.

Jenny finished her call with Sue. She crossed a busy road, then glanced at the mail icon on her toolbar and blinked twice. Her e-mail window opened and she skipped through the unread messages. One came from a bug-book club she subscribed to and needed a quick answer or she’d have to pay for a book she didn’t want.

She blinked her message on its way. A relay station half a mile away picked it up, extracted its cargo of digital code and translated this into tiny flashes of light which traveled underground, at three hundred thousand kilometers per second, along filaments of glass, to a satellite station down on the Cornish coast which turned the light flashes back into a radio signal, a single phrase in a never-ending stream, and beamed it into space. Five hundred kilometers out, a satellite received Jenny’s signal, along with hundreds of thousands of others, amplified it and sent it back down again to Earth.

“101011101001010010100010111010111010100101010010101000 . . .” called down the satellite, high up there on its lonely vigil at the edge of the void. “. . . 10001010100011101 . . .” it called down to the busy surface of the Earth:

"No thank you," it was saying on Jenny's behalf. "Please do *not* rush me my discounted bug-book edition of *Even Detectives Cry*."

A satellite dish in Cape Cod picked up the signal, and sent it on its way.

Richard looked down a little side alley and saw two foxes. They'd knocked down a pile of wooden pallets at the back of a restaurant, and were now rummaging for scraps of meat and fish. In the electric light of the city, they were pale and colorless and not at all like those foxes in storybooks with their merry faces and their cunning eyes. No one but Richard had even noticed these foxes were here.

"Hey, look! Foxes!" he said out loud, stopping, and hoping that Jenny might turn and look.

He'd picked up that she was worried and he thought the foxes might cheer her up. Women liked animals, didn't they? He was pretty sure they liked things like that.

"Look at that!" called Richard again, "Two foxes! Right in the middle of a city!"

Behind and above the foxes he also saw Jackal Head, the presiding spirit of dogs and foxes and other doggy creatures. Jackal Head regarded him with its shining eyes, but Richard looked away and said nothing. He knew from long experience that no one else could see the likes of Jackal Head, bug eyes on or not, so he concentrated on the foxes.

"Two foxes!" he called out again.

A man in a brown raincoat glanced at Richard quizzically but didn't bother to look where he was pointing. You didn't have to look at Richard for very long to realize there was something odd about him. His anorak was several sizes too big. His hair was lank. He had two days' growth of stubble on his chin. He had no bug eyes.

"Two foxes!"

No one else took any notice. A sense of weariness and desolation swept over Richard. They were all so busy with their bugs, that was the problem, talking to people far away about things that he couldn't really understand, no matter how hard he tried.

Then he noticed that Jenny was some way ahead of him—he could see her umbrella bobbing along above the crowds: pink with white polka dots—and he ran to catch up. He liked the feeling of being near her. She made him feel warm.

"Jenny," he said to himself, "Jenny, Jenny, Jenny."

And once again he laughed with pleasure, showing his gap teeth.

"Jenny, Penny, Henny," he said out loud.

"Zero, the only yogurt with less than one tenth of a calorie per serving..."

Jenny walked quickly, checking through in her mind the things she still needed to do before tomorrow. Ben would get cross with her if she ended up having to run around looking for things at the last minute. He hated disorder. He hated inefficiency of any kind. She herself was a very successful p.a. and spent all of her working days doing pretty well nothing but imposing order. But for some reason Ben made her feel bumbling and incompetent.

"*Fateful Summer*, the heartrending story of doomed love in the shadow of a global war..."

Jenny's bug eye provider knew she was twenty-eight, single and a member of the "aspirant middle-upper clerico-professional" class—and it knew from her purchasing record that she liked low fat yogurt and middle-brow novels—so it told her many times each day about interesting new diet products and exciting new books, as well as about all the other things that aspirant middle-upper clerico-professionals were known to like or be concerned about.

"Is one pound a day so *very* much to pay for life-long security. . . ?"

"Single, childless, and fancy-free? The *best* time to think about school fees! Talk to *School Plan*. Because life's too short . . ."

But if Jenny was "aspirant middle-upper clerico-professional," what was Richard? He wasn't even a typical member of the "chronically unemployed/unemployable welfare claimant" class—a low-income class that nevertheless, in aggregate, constituted a distinct and lucrative market—for he'd been adopted at the age of one and grown up in a well-to-do professional family, and had never associated with other claimants who lived apart from the population at large in social housing projects. In fact, since he had no bug eyes, no computer, no phone, and no credit card, there was hardly enough of a trace of him out in the public domain on which to base a valid class evaluation.

Richard was an isolate, a one-off. He had been a strange introverted child who his adoptive parents had never entirely learned to love. He'd left them at seventeen and now had very little contact with them, though they had bought him his little flat in Guildford, and his mother still sent money and food parcels.

Three young men in suits came by, walking briskly and overtaking first Richard and then Jenny. They worked in the City as commodity traders. They'd all got bugs on, and they were using the setting called LCV—or Local Consensual View—which allowed bug eye wearers to retransmit the signals they were receiving on an open channel, so that others in their immediate vicinity could pick them up. This enabled all three of the young men to banter with a fourth young commodity trader called Freddy who wasn't physically present.

"Freddy, you stupid fuck. Is it true you lost 90K in one hour yesterday?"

"*Freddy you stupid fuck*," muttered Richard under his breath, storing away for later examination this strange and utterly bewildering combination of affection and abuse.

"Freddy you stupid fuck," he said out loud.

He laughed. One of the young men turned round and glared at him.

Richard couldn't see Freddy, of course, or hear his reply. But Jenny, out of momentary curiosity, blinked on LCV in her bugs to get a look at him. (This was the principle behind the bug eye boom: the one who *isn't* there is always more interesting than the one who is.)

"Yeah, I lost 90K," Freddy was saying. "But last week I netted fifty mill. Being a decent trader's about taking risks, my children. Watch Uncle Freddy and learn."

So he was just a boastful little boy in a suit like his friends, Jenny concluded, glancing at the clock on her tool bar, then blinking up the internet to check the train times. Options were offered down the left hand side of her field of vision. She blinked first the "travel information" folder, and then "rail." A window appeared, inviting her to name the start and end points of her proposed journey. She mumbled the names of the stations, blinked, and was given details of the next two trains. It seemed she was cutting it a bit fine, so she paid for a ticket as she walked—it only took four blinks—and walked a little faster.

Suddenly a famous TV show host called Johnny Lamb was right in front of her. His famous catchphrase was "Come on in." Now he invited her to "come on in" to a chain store right behind him that specialized in fashion accessories. Jenny smiled. Shops had only recently taken to using LCV to advertise to passers-by and it was still a novelty to see these virtual beings appearing in front of you in the street. She walked right through Johnny Lamb, blinking LCV off again as she did so.

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Richard, of course, had no means of knowing that Johnny Lamb was there at all, but he noticed Jenny's increase in speed and hurried to match it. They were almost at the station. He felt in his pocket for his ticket—his cardboard off-peak return ticket paid for with cash—and entered the station concourse.

Two police officers called Kenneth and Chastity were waiting below the departures board. They wore heavy-duty bug eyes with specially hardened surfaces, night vision, and access to encrypted personal security data, and they were watching for illegals in the crowd.

ID cards contained tiny transmitters that could be located by sensors mounted in streets and public places. A recent innovation linked these sensors directly to police bug eyes, so that Ken's and Chas's bugs saw little green haloes over the heads of people who had valid ID and giant red arrows above people who didn't—illegal immigrants, for instance, or escaped prisoners. The amusing thing was that the illegals hadn't yet cottoned on to this. It was rather entertaining to watch them trying to slip unnoticed through the crowd, with one of those red arrows bouncing up and down over their heads all the while.

Jenny (of course) had a halo. Richard had a yellow question mark. It indicated that he was carrying a valid ID card but that he'd either got a criminal record or a record of ID problems of some sort, and therefore should be questioned if he was behaving suspiciously in any way.

Well, he *was* behaving suspiciously, thought Constable Kenneth Wright, nudging his partner. The man didn't even have a set of bugs!

"What kind of Neanderthal goes around with a bare face these days?" he said.

It was almost obscene.

Chas nodded grimly and pulled up Richard's file by looking straight at the amber question mark above his head and double-blinking.

"Mental health issues. Diagnosed schizophrenic. Detained in hospital three times. Cautioned two years ago for failing to carry an ID card," she read from the file.

Not the crime of the century, as even she would reluctantly have to admit.

"Probably left his card at home on principle," Ken said with a sigh. "Probably some stupid nutty principle. Probably the same reason why he doesn't wear bugs. No need to pull him up, Chas. He's got his card on him today."

Chastity found Ken's attitude very lax. This was not a perfect world, of course—one had to accept that there were liberals in it, and bleeding hearts, and human rights lawyers—but why let potential troublemakers walk on by when you were perfectly entitled to haul them up, ask them questions and, at the very least, let them know you were watching them?

"Excuse me, Mr. Pegg," she said, stepping forward. (She loved the way this new technology let you have people's names before you'd even spoken to them: it put them on the back foot straight away.) "Would you mind telling me why you aren't wearing bug eyes?"

Richard blinked at her, glancing anxiously round at the receding figure of Jenny, who he might never see again.

Why didn't he wear bugs? It was hard to explain. He only knew that if he possessed bugs he would drown in them.

"There isn't a law that people have to wear them, is there?" he muttered, glancing again at Jenny with her pink polka dot umbrella, who, cruelly, was getting onto the very same train that Richard would normally travel on.

Chastity didn't like his tone one bit.

"Maybe not yet," she said, "but there soon will be, like carrying an ID. And while we're on that subject, I'd like to see your . . ."

But here her colleague nudged her. Away across the concourse, a big red arrow was

jiggling into view, pointing down at a young man from Malawi called Gladstone Muzi, whose visa had expired the previous week.

"Bingo!" breathed Chas.

"Gotcha!" hissed Ken.

"Can I go then?" interrupted Richard, glancing longingly across at the sacred train that now contained the sweet and gentle Jenny.

"Oh, off you go," Chas snapped at him without shifting her gaze from her prey.

Richard ran for the train and climbed on just before the sliding doors locked shut. Then he barged through three carriages looking for Jenny, stepping over suitcases and pushing rudely past people stowing their possessions on the luggage rack. He upset several of them, because it didn't occur to him to say "excuse me" or "sorry."

But who cared? Not Richard. He didn't notice the reaction he was getting. There was Jenny, that was the important thing, there was Jenny sitting all on her own in a set of facing seats. Richard approached her and, with beating heart, spoke to her for the very first time.

"Are these seats free?"

"Yes. They are," said Jenny.

Her voice was like music. He laughed. Jenny gave a small clipped smile and looked away, reading him as odd but harmless, wondering why he wasn't wearing bugs and noticing with distaste the faint sour smell on him of slept-in clothes. Her older brother was autistic so she was used to oddness, and her feelings toward Richard were not unfriendly ones, as many people's might have been. But all the same she didn't want the bother of thinking about him just now. And she could have done without the whiff.

Then the train began to move and she glanced at the opacity icon on her toolbar and blinked it up to 80 percent. Out on the street she'd kept opacity low to let her negotiate traffic safely and avoid walking into other people. But now it was the train driver's job to watch the way ahead. Jenny no longer needed reality and could reduce accordingly its net contribution to the nervous signals reaching her visual cortex. Now, objects and people in the physical world were thin and ghostlike. It was the bug world that was solid and real.

"Shame you can't shut out smell as well as vision," she thought, glancing at Richard and screwing up her nose.

Richard, incongruously, laughed, and Jenny glanced at him, or at the dim ghost of him she could see with 20 percent of her vision, and wondered what it was that had amused him. He wasn't looking at her. It was something he'd seen outside the window. This struck her as endearing somehow, and she smiled.

To varying degrees—75 percent, 90 percent—almost everyone in the carriage, having settled in their seats, had made a similar adjustment to the opacity of their bug eyes. A soft tide of voices rose up from passengers calling husbands and wives and children and friends to tell them they were on their way.

But Jenny looked at the clock on her status bar.

"Ben will be calling soon," she thought. "Best not to call anyone else until then, or he won't be able to get through."

Ben had a bit of a short fuse when it came to things like not being able to get through. So she blinked up mail instead and sent a quick message to her boss.

"Remember to talk to Mr. Jackson in Data Services before the staff meeting!" she reminded him.

It was already in his diary, but he'd grown so used to being reminded about everything that he often forgot to look. Imposing order, she did it all day. But when it came to Ben she felt like a fool.



Around the carriage the tide of voices receded as, one by one, calls came to a conclusion and passengers settled down into their own bug-eye worlds. Some watched bug TV. Some read bug newspapers and bug books. A Canadian student picked up on a game of bug chess she was playing with a bug friend across the Atlantic. A young boy from Woking played a bug shoot-'em-up game. A woman lawyer with red hair had a look at the balance on her bug bank account. An insurance broker surfed bug porn, having first double checked that his LCV was properly switched off. (He'd had an embarrassing experience last week with a group of leering school-boys.)

Outside the window a building site passed by, lit by icy halogen spotlights. Diggers and cranes were still at work and would be through the night.

"UCF London," read giant banners all round the site. *"Building the Dream."*

It was a new kind of bug transmitter station, one of a ring around the city, which would create the new Urban Consensual Field. When it was done, every bug-wearer in London could inhabit a kind of virtual city—or one of several virtual cities—superimposed upon the city of brick and stone.

There would be ghosts in the Tower of London; there would be writing in the sky; there would be virtual bobbies on every corner. . . . The past would be made visible; the future would rise like a phoenix from the concrete and tarmac of now; and people could, if they wanted, safely stay at home and send out their digital avatars to walk the city streets.

The door at the end of the carriage slid open. A ticket inspector entered. His rail company bug eyes showed giant tickets hovering above every passenger in the carriage except one and he could see at a glance that every one of these tickets was in order. Only Richard had an empty space above his head. The inspector came to look at his piece of cardboard.

"Forget your bugs today, sir?" he inquired pleasantly, feeling in his pocket for his little-used clippers.

Jenny jumped slightly, startled by the inspector's voice. She had been vaguely aware of him entering the carriage, but he had been a barely visible presence, remote, out there, like a parent moving late at night on the landing outside the bedroom of a sleepy child. So she had quite forgotten him and gone back into her bug dream without noticing him coming close.

Not just for Jenny, but for almost everyone in it the carriage, with its white lights and its blue seats and its aluminum luggage racks, was now no more than a hazy dream. As to the used car lots and crumbling factory units that were flitting by in the dark outside, they were too insubstantial to make out at all with bugs set anything above 70 percent.

Richard was alone in the atomic world, the world of matter and space.

"One day they won't see it at all," Richard thought. "It'll just be me that keeps it going."

He laughed.

"One day aliens will invade the earth, and only I will be able to see them. Like I see the foxes and those mice that run around under the trains. Like I saw that deer."

That was a powerful memory. One night he'd woken at 2 AM feeling a need to go to the window of his little bedroom and look outside. The street had been empty, the traffic lights changing from red to yellow to green and back again, secretly, privately, as if signaling to themselves.

But a white deer had come trotting down the middle of the road: a pure white stag, with great branching antlers, trotting past the convenience store with its ads for bug card top-ups, past the silent pub, past the shop that sold discounted greeting cards and remaindered books, past the darkened laundromat. It had trotted past them and on, round the corner and out of his sight again.

A solitary car came by straight afterward, way too fast, screeching its brakes round the corner, shooting across a red light and roaring off in the opposite direction to the deer. And then silence returned again, and nothing moved at all except the traffic lights, shifting every few minutes from green to yellow to red and back again.

"It had a rider on its back," Richard said out loud in the railway carriage, suddenly remembering this fact. "It had a . . ."

Then he stopped, for Jenny had looked at him and smiled.

It was a lovely smile, even when partially obscured by bug eyes. It was a smile of tenderness and delight.

Richard laughed his gap-toothed laugh.

"Hello sweetheart!" whispered Jenny to the 3D image of her boyfriend Ben, suspended in the space where Richard was sitting. "Have you had a good day, darling? I am so looking forward to spending this time with you!"

Of course Richard couldn't see Ben frown back at her and tell her he hoped she wasn't going to be silly and girly and go over the top about everything.

After she'd hung up, Jenny turned opacity right up to ninety-five and watched the new fly-on-the-wall documentary called *Janey* about the daily life of a young secretary like herself.

"Just remember I'm on national TV," Janey was saying to her boyfriend Ray. "All over the country people are watching me on their bugs. So now tell me the truth. Are you really going to *commit*?"

According to a recent poll, nine million out of eleven million bug viewers agreed that Ray wasn't good enough for her, but tragically, heroically, crazily, she stayed with him anyway.

Jenny thought about Ben and his sharp tongue. It really hurt her, it made her feel small and foolish and insignificant. Were they going to be all right in Jamaica? Was that even a possibility? Was there really any chance of it at all?

Richard meanwhile was looking out of the window at abandoned industrial estates.

"No one sees this. No one sees this except for me."

He looked at ruined factories and warehouses and engine sheds.

"I know who'll show up now," he thought with an inward sigh.

And sure enough there was Steel Man, with its iron hands, suspended by magnetic forces in the orange city sky. And of course it spotted Richard at once, regarding him intently with its burning eyes.

Richard turned away uncomfortably, like a child avoiding the gaze of an adult who once told him off. He hunched down in his seat, with a wince and a tightening of his lips, and turned his attention determinedly to the smoke-blackened walls of Victorian tenement buildings, with buddleia sprouting from the chimney stacks, and to old billboards with their fading and peeling ads for obsolete products. (No one would ever again be bothered to paste up wrinkly paper images. Any day now advertisers would be able to use the Urban Consensual Field to put pictures in the sky.)

"If it wasn't for me," muttered Richard Pegg out loud, glancing at the opaque gog-

gles that covered Jenny's eyes and avoiding the gaze of Steel Man. "This would all just . . ."

He broke off.

A tear had rolled out from under Jenny's bug eyes, a mascara-stained tear. Richard watched, fascinated and profoundly moved, as it rolled down her right cheek.

Jenny flipped down the opacity of her bugs and began to fumble in her bag.

But Richard beat her to it, retrieving a squashed packet of tissues from under the notebook in his right anorak pocket, and leaning forward to offer it to her.

Jenny lifted her bugs right off her eyes, smiled at him, accepted the packet from him.

"Thank you," she said, pulling out a tissue and dabbing at her eyes, "thank you so much. That's very kind of you."

Richard laughed.

"It was an invisible man," he offered.

"Sorry?"

"Riding on the back of that deer. An invisible man with horns."

He didn't normally speak of such things, but Jenny he knew he could trust.

"Wow," Jenny exclaimed. "That sounds like quite something."

Richard laughed.

"It was," he said. "That's why the Need woke me. It was an atomic truth."

Jenny smiled, handed him back his tissues. Then more tears came, and Richard handed the tissues back again and watched her, fascinated, uncomprehending, but full of tenderness while she once more dried her eyes.

"I'll tell you something," Jenny sniffled. "I'm *going* to have a good time in Jamaica, whatever old misery guts decides to do. I'm going to have a good time no matter what."

She smiled.

"Is that an atomic truth, do you reckon?"

Richard laughed loudly.

At the far end of the carriage someone else laughed too, but it was nothing to do with Richard or Jenny, nothing to do with anything that was physically present at all.

"Thank you," Jenny said again. "You really are very kind."

She had done with crying. She passed Richard his packet of tissues, smiled at him one more time, and pulled her goggles back down over her eyes.

Richard settled into his seat, trying to avoid looking at Night Man, who he couldn't help noticing was out there hovering over the dark fields like a giant owl, and staring gloomily in at him with its enormous eyes. Gloomy old Night Man he could do without, but he felt he'd had a good day all the same. ○

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# THE ARMIES OF ELFLAND

Eileen Gunn & Michael Swanwick

Eileen Gunn tells us the following tale “is one of several stories that Michael and I drafted online, in real time, as part of the Clarion West Write-a-thon in 2007. As stunts go, it was pretty much as exhilarating as wing-walking on a bi-plane, without being quite so physically dangerous. Not to say that collaborating with Michael is without its dangers. . . .” Eileen is a short story writer who lives in Seattle. She is also editor of the *Infinite Matrix*, the *Flying Dutchman* of online magazines. Her work has received the Nebula award in the US and the Sense of Gender Award in Japan. The multiple award-winner Michael Swanwick’s most recent novel, *The Dragons of Babel*, is just out in paperback from Tor Books. *The Best of Michael Swanwick*, a collection of Michael’s stories, came out late last year from Tachyon Publications.

It was the middle of the night when the mirrors came out of the elves. With a sound like the cushioned patter of an ice storm, the tiny mirrors fell to the ground, leaving a crust of glitter behind the marching elf-army. They bled, of course, but the elven blood restored the dry land, undoing the effects of the drought, and moss emerged green from the ground in the troops’ wake.

The sight of the moss brought forth the drought-starved humans and their pathetic get to the mouths of their caves.

“Stay here!” the new father commanded. Not one of the children was his. But all the real fathers were dead, so they had no choice but to obey him or be beaten.

“Don’t go,” Agnes wanted to say. “Don’t trust them.” But Richard gently touched her lips to silence her. Richard was the oldest of the children, indeed almost an adult himself, and he did what he could to protect the others.

The adults fell on the damp moss, tearing it up by the double-handful like so much bread dough. They sucked the moisture from it and crammed its substance down their throats. Briefly, all seemed well. One of the new father’s wives was raising an arm to beckon the children down when the minute mirrors they had ingested suddenly expanded to ten, a hundred, a thousand times their original size. Jagged shards of mirror erupted from their flesh as horns, tusks, and spines. Blood fountained into the air and pooled on the ground, glimmering in the moonlight. The adults splashed through it, lurching grotesquely, writhing and howling in pain.

The children hid their eyes and turned away. The littlest ones cried.

Then, suddenly, there was silence. That was the hardest to bear of all.

But though the adults had ceased screaming, they did not fall. Brutally sharp glass fragments jutted from every inch of their bodies, holding them upright and rigid.

Nothing that was human remained of the adults. They had turned to crystal.

"We've got to bury them," Agnes said firmly. "We can't just leave them standing like that."

"How?" Richard asked. "We can't even touch them."

The children had no shovels, but even with shovels they would have had a tough time trying to dig graves on the dry, barren beach. Where they stood had once been the shore of a small arm of the Pacific Ocean. But then the ocean had dried up and become a low, mountainous land of cliffs and sudden rifts, blanketed with dead fish and rotting seaweed. The sun had baked the wasteland that the elves had first created and then crossed as black and hard as obsidian. There would be no burials there.

"We can throw stones," Frederic said. He was the youngest of the children. He hadn't spoken until he was three, which was over five years ago. When he did start to speak, however, his first words were, "Things are not as they once were." Followed, after two days of intense thought, by, "In any case, they could be arranged better." He came up with ideas nobody else could have.

So they did as he suggested, smashing the starlight-glittery figures from a distance until they were nothing but mounds of broken glass. Richard, who had read a lot back when there were books, said, "In ancient times when men were warriors and carried spears, they buried their dead in mounds of rocks called cairns. This was an honorable form of burial. Even kings and queens were buried that way." Then he turned to Agnes. "You're good with words," he said. "Please. Say a few words over the dead."

Agnes took a deep breath. At last she said, "The adults were stupid." Everybody nodded in agreement. "But the elves are cruel, and that's worse." Everybody nodded again. "I'm sick of them, and I'm sick of their war." She raised her voice. "I want to have enough food to eat! All the food I want, every day of my life. I'm going to get it, too. I don't know how. But I do know that I'm never going to be fooled by the elves or their mirrors or their green moss ever again!"

She spat on the ground, and everyone else followed suit.

"Amen," she said.

She had no idea how futile her vow would prove.

During the Alien Invasions, as they were called before the world learned that the armies of Elfland came not from someplace unimaginably far away but from somewhere impossibly nearby, the children and their parents had been vacationing on a resort near Puget Sound. So shocked were the parents that at first they didn't think to shield the children from their television sets. So the children saw the slaughter—what happened to the people who resisted the elves, and then what happened to the people who didn't. When the elves came to Seattle, they left the television stations untouched, and courteously escorted the cameramen to Volunteer Park to broadcast their victory celebration to whoever might still be watching.

Under the guidance of their ghastly, beautiful queen, the invaders flayed their prisoners. This they did with exquisite skill, so that all were still alive when the work was done. Then they roasted them over coals. Troubadours wandered up and down the rows of scorched and screaming flesh, playing their harps in accompaniment. Elf-lords and elf-ladies formed quadrilles on the greensward in front of the

band shell and danced entrancingly. Afterwards, they threw themselves down on the grass and ate heaping platters of roasted human flesh, while goblin servants poured foaming wine into sapphire goblets.

Then they torched the city.

The children understood cruelty far more intimately than did the adults, who had the army and the police and a hundred other social institutions to shield them from schoolyard beatings, casual theft, and having bugs and other vermin dropped into one's food or mouth or clothing simply because somebody larger was bored. But they had never before seen such cruelty as this. What shocked them was not the deeds in themselves—they had imagined much worse—but that nobody took pleasure from them. These cruelties were not done with fiendish playground glee. There was no malice behind them, no glorying in the cruelty of what was done. Just a string of horrifying and senseless images running night and day on the television, until one day the transmitters stopped and there were no more.

That was when Frederick told the children that they had to go into the caves, and Richard led them all there. When the adults came to bring them back to the rental bungalows, Richard led the children deeper into the darkness and the adults followed. Thus it was that they few survived when every building on the island simultaneously burst into flames. It was cold in the caves, but at night the adults went out and foraged for food and blankets and fuel. Every now and then some of them didn't return.

Months passed.

When the elves changed the weather and shrank the seas, the grasses and crops dried up. There was little to eat, and the adults weren't anything like they used to be. Hunger made them unpredictable, violent, and impulsive.

It was no wonder, then, that the elves were able to catch them by surprise.

The adults were dead. Human history was over.

In the wake of the elves, grass returned, and then flowers. Trees rocketed to the sky. Some bore fruit. Agnes was roasting apples in the coals of a campfire one morning, when Richard sat down beside her, the sun bright in his golden-red hair. "We need weapons," he said. "For when the elves return. I tried making a bow and arrows. But it's just a toy. It wouldn't kill anything larger than a sparrow."

Agnes thought. "We can make spears, like the ones the cairn-people had. Spears are easy to use, and almost anything sharp would do for a head."

Richard laughed with delight. "If you were older, I'd kiss you!" he cried, and hurried off to look for materials.

Leaving Agnes with the strangest feeling. Almost, she wished she was older. Almost, she wished he would kiss her.

That afternoon the elves returned and took them all prisoner.

This time, they killed nobody. Lean elves with long, stinger-tipped abdomens, like yellow-jackets, injected venom into the children's bodies. They were immobilized and stacked like cordwood on a long wooden tray, then flown by winged elves back to their camp. There, they were dumped to the ground and dosed with antivenom. As they came back to life, the smaller children began to cry.

Not Agnes, however. Her body ached from being stung, but she was far more concerned about what was going to happen next. She looked around carefully. The elfen camp was made up of brightly colored tents, far loftier than the ones people used for camping, with long silk pennons flying from their tips. They stood on a hilltop and the tents went on forever below them, like a field of flowers that had no end.

There was a groan behind Agnes, and somebody clutched her shoulder. With a



shriek, she whirled about, only to discover Richard groggily staggering to his feet. "Oh!" she cried. "You scared me!"

A bamboo whip cut across her back.

It was just a single blow, but it was stunning in its effect. Agnes fell to her knees. Looking up through brimming tears, she saw an elegant and fearsomely beautiful grey-skinned elf in armor of ice lowering his whip. He made a gesture, lightly squeezing his own lips shut. Then he raised his eyebrows questioningly: *Do you understand?*

Richard started forward, fists clenched, as if to attack the elf, but Agnes flung her arms around him and held him back. When he twisted angrily toward her, she shook her head. Then, facing the elf, she nodded.

The elf made a sweeping gesture that encompassed all seven children. Gracefully, he gestured with his whip up a broad grassy avenue between the tents: *Go that way.*

They obeyed. Agnes went first, keeping her head down submissively, but secretly observing all that she could and filing it all away for future use. A half-step after her came Richard, head high and face stony. Next were the three middle children, Lexi, Latoya, and Marcus. Last of all came Frederic and Elsie, who were the youngest. If Agnes dawdled or started to glance behind herself, she felt a light flick of the grey elf's whip on the back of her neck. It was just a reminder, but a potent one. Agnes hoped the littler children were being more circumspect than she, but she doubted very much that they were.

They were marched past a corral where centaurs fought with fists and hooves for the entertainment of their elven captors, and then by a knackery where unicorn carcasses were hung on meat-hooks to cure. Under an arch made of two enormous ivory tusks they went, and around a pyramid of wine barrels being assembled by red-bearded dwarves only half as tall as the hogsheads were. At last they came to their destination.

It was a tent as wide and bright as the sunset, whose billowing walls of silks and velvets burned ember red and blood ochre, shot through with molten golds and scarlets that shimmered as if they came from a spectrum alien to human eyes. Banners and swags of orange and purple and black flew from the tops of the tent poles, kept permanently a-flutter by small playful zephyrs that smelled of cinnamon, cardamom, and hot peppers. She could not read the sigils on the flags, but she did not need to. By the psychic wind of terror and awe that gushed from the doorway to the tent, she felt, she sensed, she *knew* who lay within.

It could only be the dreadful Queen of Elfland.

At the castle-tent's salient, the younger children were marched down a passage to the left, while Richard and Agnes were gestured inside. Almost, she cried after them. But the ice-armored elf raised his whip in warning. So Agnes made no sound, though she stretched out her arms toward the little ones as they disappeared from her ken.

Entering the tent was like stepping into another world. Gone were the somber reds and sullen crimsons, exchanged for sprightly greens and yellows and blues. Hummingbirds darted here and there. There was a tinkling of small bells, like wind chimes in a summer breeze. The sun shone brightly through the silk walls making luminous the embroidered draperies showing scenes of war and feasting, of love-making and animal-hunting, and of things for which Agnes had no words. They wavered with every movement of the air, so that the figures seemed to be alive and in motion, pleading to be freed.

Their guard came to a stop. Overcome with dread, Agnes seized Richard's hand. He squeezed hers back, reassuringly.

A gong sounded. The air shattered like the surface of a pond after a frog leaps into

its center, and when the reverberations stopped and the air was still again, the elf-queen was simply *there*.

She reclined casually on the air just above a brocade-covered divan in the center of the tent. She wore a cream-colored man's Brioni suit, cunningly re-tailored to fit her elegant body, an apricot silk blouse open to the navel, from which peeked a teardrop-shaped rock-crystal pendant, and no shoes. Her skin was the color of polished bronze, with hints of verdigris and subtle green depths. Her cheekbones were high and sharp. Her eyes were set at an angle, and they flashed jungle-green, an emerald effulgence from a star that did not shine in the night sky of this world. Unbidden a name popped into Agnes's mind: *Melisaundre*.

Queen Melisaundre was beautiful. Even Agnes could see that.

Beside her, Richard was transfixed.

"We came here by accident," the elf-queen said casually, as if returning to a conversation already in progress. "We didn't know your world even existed here on the marches of Avalon, that fey land we set out to conquer. Imagine our surprise and delight! A realm of possibilities opened before us! As it happened, of course, we destroyed your lands and killed your people. But, well . . . we were bored, pure and simple. What else could we have done? What other would any sensible being have done in our position?"

Agnes knew it would be a mistake to answer, and she kept her mouth shut. She was relieved at first that Richard did the same, but then she dared a quick sideways glance and saw that he was blushing. At a time like this! Agnes all but stamped her foot. If Richard, of all people, couldn't be relied on to keep his wits about him, then who could?

Melisaundre dangled her bauble before her lips and blew softly upon it, setting it swinging gently on the pendulum of its chain. She reached out and delicately touched it—like so!—with the tip of a tongue as pink as a cat's. "Don't you wish you could be this jewel?" she asked. "Wouldn't you like to lie between my breasts forever? Wouldn't that be the pleasantest doom imaginable?"

"Thank you ma'am, no," Agnes said quickly, dipping the briefest of curtseys. It was essential to be polite: she realized that instinctively. And the higher the level of danger, the more polite you had to be. She knew she had to be very, very polite to the queen of the elves.

Richard stepped forward involuntarily, his eyes glowing as if lit by a flash from a hidden mirror. In a dazed voice, he said, "I think that . . ."

"Richard! No!" Agnes said.

"I mean, it kind of sounds like . . ."

"Stop! Stop! Stop!"

"Maybe, I don't know . . ."

"Think, Richard! Don't just—"

" . . . I'd like that."

And he was gone.

The elf-queen held the pendant up, admiring its newly flawed interior. "A jewel with a soul reflects a better quality of light, don't you think?" she remarked lightly. "And as we have none of our own, we are so grateful when you volunteer yours."

Without thinking, Agnes launched herself at the elf-queen, clawing, kicking, and screaming. And found herself immediately frozen in mid-air, suspended about four feet above the floor.

"Cassis and asphalt," said the elf-queen. "Hints of anise. An elusive smoky quality. Just a trace of honey. And a flintiness under it all. We could bottle that and sell it at market." She placed her long, sharp nose in the crook of Agnes's neck and inhaled deeply. Sharp fingers pinched Agnes's arms and the inside of a leg, as if assessing her

plumpness. "But with encouragement, what might you not become? Worthy, perhaps, of even a queen's palate." She raised her voice. "Store her with the others, and we'll do more with her later."

Agnes was taken away and fed—on marzipan, melon slices, and sugared oranges, on candied ginger and great slabs of baklava so intensely sweet they made her teeth ache, washed down with honeyed tea. She ate until her stomach hurt. But all the while, though she was careful to hide it, she burnt with that deep inner anger of which children, in the sentimental imagination, were deemed incapable. Any casual observer of a kindergarten or a schoolyard, however, can see that the younger the child, the less capable it is of hiding any anger it may harbor. By Agnes's age, most children are able to bank their fury so that it is generally unseen by adults and, often, by the child itself. Agnes certainly could do that.

Then she was washed, in water that had been heated to body temperature and had hibiscuses afloat in it. Needle-toothed yakshis dried her down with impossibly fluffy towels and helped her into new garments. They were of elven make and did not cover her stomach, but otherwise they seemed decent enough. Finally she was led to a large oval cushion which, though it looked suspiciously to her like the sort of thing people had for their pet dogs or cats, was nevertheless so comfortable that she fell asleep almost immediately.

When Agnes awoke, the bed was rocking gently under her. She drew aside the bed-curtain and discovered that the armies were on the march again, and that her bed was being carried by two trolls. She swung her legs over the edge so she could climb down.

"I'd advise you not to do that, Missy," one of the trolls said. He was a tusked grotesque with legs like a rhinoceros's.

"If you did," said the second, "we'll reflexively stop you in the most painful available manner."

"Which, truth be told, we'd really rather not."

"You're just another victim of elvish depravity, like we are, after all."

"So just stay with the program, okay?"

Agnes scrambled back into the center of the bed. "Okay," she said. And, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to get you in trouble."

"You can't get us in trouble, Missy."

"Even if you could, what would we care?"

"We're not self-aware."

"Just bundles of reflexive responses, is all. It's not as if we were actually conscious."

So she spent most of the day, dozing off and on, being carried along with the trooping armies of Elfland. When at last they made camp, she climbed down and fed herself from one of the many tables overflowing with food of all kinds. Then Melisaundre sent for her.

"You are a green gemstone, I believe," the elf-queen said. "So you shall be treated with jealousy."

"Ma'am? I don't understand."

"You don't need to understand. Only to obey."

Thus it was that for thrice a thousand and one nights in a row, Agnes served as the elf-queen's cup bearer. Silent and attentive, she sat on a small chair in a shadowy corner while her liege lady consulted with scholars and annotated books. Slim in green livery, she watched the elf-queen practice her archery, and brought iced tea to slake her thirst between bouts. At banquets, she poured a sip of every libation into a

shallow bowl and drank it down, to test for poison. Rarely did she speak. Always did she watch. In this way, she picked up something of an education in the ways of polite society.

Even more did she learn at night, when the elf-queen retired to her bed and comported herself with whomever had caught her eye during the long day. Agnes brought flagons of wine to set the mood beforehand, vials of aphrodisiacs when the queen's lovers began to flag, and fruit-flavored ices to refresh them afterward. She watched as the elf-queen coupled with warriors, scholars, poets, fauns, women by threes and men by the brace, with centaurs and imps as small as lapdogs and quilled apes with extra arms. It was the queen's custom that her lovers should begin by entertaining her with oration and so, night after night, they related gesta taken from the history of Elfland, or ornate tales of bawdry stemming from their own experiences. Scholars taught her alchemy and astrology and the secret workings of the crystal spheres that moved the stars and planets through their complex dance in the night. Soldiers spoke of battles they had fought and heroic deeds they had seen.

Agnes watched. And she listened.

Sometimes, when Melisaundre was bored, she brought Richard out of his gem. He hardly noticed Agnes's presence, so besotted was he with the elf-queen. Agnes, for her part, watched him steadily, but her stare was hard. Once, during the heat of passion, his eyes accidentally met hers and the elf-queen immediately plunged a hand into his chest and pulled out his living, beating heart. He arched and spasmed until she returned the organ to its proper place.

"You liked that, didn't you?" Melisaundre murmured, looking Agnes straight in the eye.

"Whatever you want me to like," he gasped, "I will."

Agnes, as always, said nothing.

After the elf-queen had ridden him like a horse, Richard rolled over onto his back and when Agnes emerged from the shadows with the ices, he looked surprised to see her. He grinned shyly and started to say something, only to be shushed by an imperious royal finger laid across his lips. "You two are not to talk," the queen said. "Not now. Not ever."

Then she turned to Agnes. "Do you envy me, little virgin? Do you envy how many men come to pay me court, your precious friend among them, and how avidly they do so?"

"Yes, your majesty," Agnes said tonelessly.

"They'll never do any of that to you, I assure you. *He* will never so much as touch you. I'll make sure of that."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Oh, you don't fool me. You may not want it yet, but already you know you will. And every night you'll stand and watch, yearning, always yearning. . . . Those whom I bring to my bed are a complaisant lot. They'd be only too happy to oblige you, especially your lovely, dimwitted Richard here. But you shall stand and watch and grow old and withered and filled with regrets, while I remain gloriously young forever. When you die, I'll have your ashes made into a godemiché, which will rest near my orgies every night, with Richard immortal and at my service. But never—not even once!—will it be used."

"As you please, ma'am."

In a fury, the elf-queen seized a goblet and flung it down on the flagstone floor. It shattered, sending fragments of crystal everywhere. "You wicked, stubborn *child*! Do you think stunting your potential will make you happy? It will not! Embrace your anger, and it will bring you vividly alive. You will be an avid, thwarted, hopelessly vengeful avatar of spite!"

"As you wish, ma'am."

Queen Melisaundre screamed in rage. Then she bade Richard mount her once more, as Agnes stood by.

But the prize of the elf-queen's collection was Frederic.

"My rough little diamond," the elf-queen called him. She dressed him in jester's motley, and brought him out to amuse her guests at banquets. They would lie in triples, twains, and tangles, on chaises about the court, while Frederic stood in the center and harangued them.

"You have no emotions of your own," Frederic said. He looked so solemn, Agnes thought, in those big round glasses of his. "That's your greatest weakness, and someday it will be your downfall."

The elves responded with gales of laughter.

"You made a terrible mistake when you destroyed almost all of my people. It made those of us who remain rare. It made us powerful. Without us, you wouldn't even know you're alive."

"And what about you, little fool?" an elf-baron shouted back at him. "What would you do without us?"

"I'd just go on living. I wouldn't miss you at all."

They howled.

Another time, Frederic said, "The Earth is a sphere that revolves about a spherical Sun. The Moon is spherical too, and it revolves around the Earth." Then, as his audience convulsed, "How many years have you marched around this world without finding its boundaries? Always you search for the way back to your own world. The land you came from is as flat as a checkerboard and so ours baffles you. You stupid! You are trapped here forever by your own ignorance."

Finally, Frederic said, "You think us your prisoners, but it is you who are held captive by the topology of your thoughts. *I* am free! Unlike yourselves, I can move as I wish in all Euclidian dimensions. The only reason I share this with you is that you cannot possibly comprehend it. Should I wish, I can leave at any time by simply turning from your plane."

Abruptly he crouched down and somersaulted away, out the door and gone.

The elves continued jeering and laughing at his japes for another hour, just as if he hadn't left.

After the queen's orgies that night, Agnes lay on her pallet thinking as hard as ever she had thought before. Frederic had been speaking directly to her—she was sure of it. Was it rolling into a ball that had rendered Frederic invisible to the elves? Or was it simply his bold, spit-in-your-face self-confidence?

Agnes felt anything but bold. But the challenge had been put to her. She had to follow Frederic's example, curl into a ball, and roll outside. Either she would survive or the guards would kill her. It was as clean and simple as that.

So she rolled herself into a ball and tumbled off her pallet and out of the tent. The demon-hounds crouching by the salient did not even see her, though their eyes darted everywhere, their nostrils flared, and their ears were pricked for sounds far subtler than those she made.

Agnes somersaulted out into the moonlight.

Out on the grassy sward and down the bank she rolled, out of sight of the guards. When she came to a halt, she was not surprised to see Frederic tumbling to meet her.

"It certainly took you long enough," he said.

"Unlike you," Agnes replied tartly, "I can't simply do and say whatever I want, whenever I wish."

"And whose fault is that? The elves have no concept of reality save what they see reflected through us. I've been trying to explain that to you since forever."

"Do you know what happened to Richard? The queen—"

"What befell Richard would not have happened if he hadn't allowed it."

"She keeps him in a jewel around her neck!"

"He was the oldest. He had the choice of staying and protecting us as best he could, or a safe life of cosseted slavery, and he chose wrong. It was despicable of Melisaundre to offer such a choice to someone so weak, of course."

"You understand everyone so well," Agnes said bitterly.

"I think we have argued enough for one night," said Frederic. "Be sure to somersault your way back to your pallet. It confuses the elves when we rotate or spin, and somersaults short-circuit their brains entirely. I suspect that, like paper dolls, they're not completely suited to life in three dimensions."

He tumbled away.

Agnes stood motionless for a long time. The tents of the armies of Elfland stretched away to the horizon as numerous as blades of grass in a meadow, and the queen's tent sat at the very center of the camp. A lunar moth fluttered raggedly past, and Agnes reflected that they two—she and it—were equally free and purposeless. Yet the lunar moth did have a purpose: to procreate, to lay clutches of tiny eggs on the leaves of trees. She had no such destiny; in its place she was forced to watch the futile carnival of Melisaundre's endless and sterile couplings.

Now that Frederic had given her the key to freedom, she didn't know what to do with it. Where would she go? During waking hours, she could find the other children, for they were held close to the elf-queen's court, in case her whim required them. But when the revelries wound down into exhaustion, they were packed away to the fringes of the camp, to tents pitched among the ogres, dwarves, and other enslaved races.

She would not find the children tonight. And tomorrow, after the marching was done, their tents would be pitched elsewhere.

Nor could she escape into the outside world. There was nothing there but wilderness and ruins. Perhaps there were still people huddling fearfully in caves, as she once had. But what point was there in resuming that wretched and untenable existence?

Frederic, with his unique way of thinking, might be free, but Agnes was not. All the world was her prison.

Still, she had learned something tonight, and who could say it would not turn out to be useful? Clutching the knowledge tight to herself, Agnes tumbled back to her humble pallet at the foot of Queen Melisaundre's luxurious bed.

Months passed, possibly years. Agnes had no way of measuring time: marks on paper, knots in her lacings, any accounting whatsoever eased away while she slept, leaving no trace.

At last there came a day when the armies did not march. The camp swarmed with activity. Elves flew into the nearest abandoned city and plundered it of building materials. Draft-giants hauled wagonloads of stone and enormous timbers. An arena arose in what had been a meadow the night before. Bleachers surrounded the oval of grass. Tall white walls soared upward and were decorated with clusters of the severed heads of ghostly inhuman creatures that Agnes had never seen alive.

Queen Melisaundre came silently out of her tent and gazed upon the arena. Then she turned to Agnes. "So," she said. "The day has arrived at last."

Agnes did not ask, but the queen answered her anyway: "You idiot child! The day we contend in battle and one of us kills the other, of course. Whatever happens, it will be a relief to be free at last of your constant witless questioning."



It was vital that Agnes control her response. Anger the queen would understand: She would know instinctively how to react. Fear and defiance as well. But disregard? How could anybody dare ignore so dangerously mercurial a monarch? Agnes yawned and walked off, leaving Melisaundre speaking sharply to empty air.

She found Frederic in a brocade tent the color of dried blood, with jacquard dragons in its weave. Inside was a library whose stacks went on forever, dwindling into dusk. Bespectacled hobgoblins clambered up and down ladders, fetching and returning leather-bound manuscripts. Trolls stood by like bookstands, holding out dictionaries and volumes of encyclopediae.

Frederic sat at a small table, reading.

"What's this about me killing the queen?" Agnes asked. Somehow, she did not doubt it could be done.

Frederic shut his book. "It's time. I can read these grimoires without the queen's scholars now. So we no longer need her."

"You mean we could have been free of her before this and you did nothing?" Agnes was accustomed to holding back her emotions, but now she found herself quivering and white with rage.

"Yes, of course, long ago. You'd have noticed this yourself, if you hadn't been mooning over Richard."

Agnes slapped him as hard as she could.

One side of Frederic's face began slowly turning red. His voice remained mild, nevertheless. "I deserved that, I suppose. However, when we are married, you must not hit me again. It's not conducive to marital harmony."

"Married!?"

"Married." Frederic stood. He was taller than Agnes, which had never been the case before, and when he took off his glasses, as he did now, he was not entirely unhandsome. He was, Agnes realized with a shock, an adult, a man. "This has nothing to do with your personal feelings. Or mine, really. Agnes, you are the only human capable of assuming the elf-queen's role. But you have, as yet, no idea of how to wield power and you know it. I, on the other hand, do; so we must be wed."

"It would be a loveless marriage."

"That will change," said Frederic, "if we want it to. We need each other. Our strengths are complementary; the weaknesses of one can be negated by the other." His face was as pale and expressionless as the moon. "As a basis for marriage need is stronger than love."

Agnes thought back to all she had learned from the elf-queen's advisors and political philosophers and realized that it was true: Need was a very strong bond indeed. Those same sources, however, had also taught that once needs were met, such bonds would dissolve like fairy dew.

Agnes prepared for battle. She was given, by the elven court, an armory shed at one end of the lists and two pages to dress her. They were pubescent boys, milky-skinned, beautiful, and naked. So far as she could tell, they were identical twins.

The pages were removing her clothing when Frederic rolled in. He grabbed one by the scruff of the neck and forcibly ousted him. The second followed after.

Agnes snatched up her blouse and struggled back into it. But Frederic did not so much as glance at her. He put down a cloth-wrapped package as long as a sword and started rummaging through the armor laid out for her. "She's going to strike you three times," he said. "First, on your upper right arm. So you'll need a pauldron."

The pauldron covered her entire upper arm and was padded underneath. He strapped it on her, right over her blouse.

"The second blow will strike you directly above your left knee. You'll need a cuish."

"I feel ridiculous," Agnes said, to hide her embarrassment, as he reached between her thighs to tighten the cinches. "I'm afraid I might fall over."

Frederic ignored her. "Neither of those blows will be lethal: They are intended to disable and unbalance you. The third, and, potentially, the killing blow, will come not from the elf-queen's sword like the first two, but her spear. She'll toss the sword aside and then flip the spear up into the air and catch it back-handed behind her, so that her arm is up and ready for the strike." He held up his arm to demonstrate. "Then it will come down, and hard, right in the middle of your stomach."

"How do you know all this?"

"I've been studying. This sort of thing is all written down."

Frederic took from his kit a triple length of stiff brown leather. He wrapped it around and around Agnes's abdomen so tightly she could barely breathe. Over it he placed a chain mail stomacher. Then, atop all, he strapped on an item of shaped metal he called a tace. "There," he said at last. "She might knock the wind out of you, but she won't kill you."

"What weapon should I use?"

"None of these," Frederic said, dismissing with a glance a gleaming selection of swords, spears, and morning stars. "They're enchanted not to hurt her—you might as well try to take down a tank with a custard pie." He unwrapped the package he had brought with him. "Use this instead."

Agnes laughed involuntarily.

It was a baseball bat.

"Take it," Frederic said. "Try it out."

She swung the bat stiffly back and forth.

"Put your back into it. Swing from the shoulders." He grabbed the bat and showed her what he meant.

Agnes took back the bat and swung again, with more strength. "I could never keep my eye on the ball. It's so small and it comes at you so fast."

"It won't be a ball. It will be Queen Melisaundre's head, and it will be the size of a small melon, plenty big enough to see. Just think of how you have served her, over the years, and she you."

Agnes swung the bat with force.

"I think you're getting the feel of it."

"I wish I was a boy," Agnes said. "I hope I don't look as stupid as I feel."

To her profound surprise, Frederic grabbed her and kissed her full on the lips. Then he pushed her away and stared straight into her eyes. "You look like you're going to free us from elven tyranny forever," he said fervently. "You look like the very first human queen of all the world. I don't wish you were a boy at all."

Then the heralds blew their clarions and the doors of the shed flung themselves wide.

"Go," Frederic said. "Set us free."

Agnes did not so much stride out into the lists as stumble. Yet the throngs of elves (with here and there a human bobbing in the air; only she, it seemed, knew no magic) roared at the sight of her, as if she were an Amazon champion.

Directly across the arena, Queen Melisaundre stepped down from her throne, looking every inch the warrior-queen. Her slim, powerful figure was clad in dazzling gold plate. A scarlet cape flew out behind her, lifted by a wind that did not exist for Agnes. Her helmet was adorned with wings, as if she were a Valkyrie, and so cut that her hair flowed out becomingly behind her.

In her hand was a sword of moon-silver, harder than steel and lighter than a feather. At her back was a long spear.

Agnes hoisted her baseball bat, feeling like a clumsy human yokel. She closed her eyes in silent prayer: Make this quick, she thought. Whether I win or whether I lose, make it quick.

Somebody threw a cloth-of-gold scarf into the air. It fluttered lazily downward, drawing all eyes after it.

When it touched the ground, Queen Melisaundre screamed like an eagle and ran straight toward Agnes. Her long legs carried her quickly and effortlessly across the green lawn. She was beautiful to watch.

Agnes suddenly realized that she should be running too and began to lumber forward.

They met.

It all went as Frederic had said it would. Queen Melisaundre delivered a stinging blow to Agnes's armored and padded shoulder, and a second to her leg that would have crippled her had it not been for the cuish. Then she tossed the sword aside as if it were a plaything she had tired of. One hand deftly undid the strap holding the spear to her back. The other reached behind her and flipped the spear up into the air.

Queen Melisaundre caught the spear and froze for an instant, a goddess incarnate. Then, with her hair lashing and the battle-light blazing about her face, she drove the spear downward with every ounce of her strength.

The spearhead pierced Agnes's tace with a shriek of ripping metal. But the chain mail underneath held, and the wrapped layers of leather softened the blow.

Somewhat.

It felt like getting kicked in the stomach by a horse. All the breath flew out of Agnes and she was driven back a good three feet. But though for an instant all the world went black and there was nothing in it but pain, she did *not* fall down.

Then she could see again, and she was running forward, all in a rage, the baseball bat cocked and ready to swing. Take this, bitch, she thought. You with your perfect face and perfect legs and perfect everything else. With your courtiers and sycophants and lovers by the score. With your cruelty and power and the admiration of all the world and Richard too.

A fierce blood-lust filled her. Take this for being everything I am not.

It was that last thought that pulled Agnes out of her madness, for she recognized in it—as who would not?—the envy, jealousy, and spite that the elf-queen had so long been nurturing in her. And so recognizing it, she rejected it. She refused to let it be a part of her.

It was not a rational decision, for on purely logical grounds she understood that she had to kill the queen. It was simple revulsion that caused her to pull back before her blow reached its target. The bat swung past the elf-queen, missing her by a whisker.

Queen Melisaundre's head shattered anyway.

Frederic led Agnes away from Melisaundre's lifeless corpse toward the throne, whispering urgently in her ear. "You are the queen now. It's important that you act the part. Speak slowly and clearly. Say that your rule will be benign but absolute. A new empire shall arise from the ashes of the old—a human empire. All magical talismans, potions, et cetera, are to be presented to the royal court that they may be made subject to your power. In this way all magicks will support the State and we need never fear rebellion. Finally, if it please you, your majesty, let us be married immediately. Announce that I am to be your consort and in no sense king. I will act in a purely advisory manner, subordinate to the throne. Do you understand?"

Agnes nodded once, regally, and withdrew her arm from his. With the slightest flutter of the fingers of one hand she gestured him back into the crowd.

Frederic backed away, struggling not to grin.

She ascended to the throne.

Everyone cheered, elves as well as the humans. Looking out over them, Agnes was surprised to see that the other children were all grown now. Some of them had children of their own.

Human history has begun again, she thought. And this will be known forever as the Day of Two Queens.

Agnes raised a hand for silence. "I am your new queen and my power is absolute. Does anyone here dispute that?"

Nobody spoke.

"Well, then. My reign shall consist entirely of three edicts. The first is that Frederic shall search through the grimoires and books of spells to either discover a way to return the elves to their own world or, failing that, otherwise rid our world of their presence. That shall be his sole employment until his task is done, however many years it may take."

Frederic looked stricken.

"The second is that until that happy day when they are gone, the elves shall be set to work restoring our world to what it was before they came. We will settle here and scour the wilderness for human survivors. When such are found, those who will may join us. Those who will not shall be left in peace.

"The third and last edict is that henceforth we shall have no queens or absolute rulers of any kind. Form committees, hold elections, do whatever you like—but I will not tell you how to live your lives." Mouths fell open. Eyes widened in shock. Frederic put his head in his hands.

Agnes stepped down from the throne, a queen no more.

After her abdication, she went to see Richard.

Agnes dressed as carefully for this meeting as ever she had in her life. Her clothing was deliberately modest. Yet it did nothing to disguise her newly adult shape. Her jewelry drew no attention to itself. She wore makeup, though she doubted that Richard, used as he was to Queen Melisaundre's theatrical extravagance, would notice.

The elf-queen's tent smelled as always of incense, spices, and perfume. Yet the air felt strangely clean, for the cat-in-the-heat stench of the queen herself was gone. Beside her bed (sheeted in green and blue satins with foams of lace so that it was almost as vast and billowy as the sea itself) was a small obsidian box. In it rested Richard's gemstone.

When Agnes had laid out shirt and treads on the bed, she took the rock crystal gem and warmed it between her hands. It had been clear and ordinary once, but Richard's soul had deepened its color into a golden-red topaz with hints of flame at its heart. Speaking a word she had often heard from the lips of Queen Melisaundre, she summoned Richard from its depths.

He appeared, smiling sleepily, in the middle of the bed.

When Richard saw that he and Agnes were alone, he sat up and donned the russet-colored clothing—first the trousers and then the sark. They fit him well and seeing him thus clad Agnes felt a sudden flush of desire that, paradoxically, she had not felt on beholding him naked.

It was true, she thought. She genuinely had come of age, if Richard's mere presence could disorder her thinking so.

"Where is Melisaundre?" he asked.

Agnes's mouth felt dry. She could not form words with it at first. But at last she managed to croak, "There have been . . . I have made some changes."

Then she told him.

When Agnes emerged from the tent at last, her face was grim and a golden-red stone hung from a silver chain about her neck.

Frederic was waiting for her. "What shall we do with that?" he asked, gesturing toward the tent.

"Burn it," she said. She knew she had surrendered all authority to give such a command. But listening to her own voice, she knew too that she would be obeyed. "Burn it to the ground."

Frederic nodded and two lovely young women whom Agnes realized with dull astonishment used to be the young Lexi and Latoya raised up hands that burst into fire. Stepping forward, they stroked the silks and velvets. Soft flames rose up the sides of the tent, merged, and became an inferno. When Agnes made no motion to get away from the heat, Frederic gently took her by the arm and led her toward the cool.

Agnes could feel the flames at her back. Shadows leaped and cavorted before her.

"What of Richard?" Frederic asked.

She touched the gem. "He did not care to share our lives without Melisaundre," she said. "I gave him permission to return to his crystal, to his oblivion."

Frederic crooked a sad smile. "He is not dead but sleeping," he quoted from one of Richard's favorite books. "Perhaps he will reconsider someday, when we have remade the world into a pleasant place again. I . . . I will become the junior husband then, if that is what you wish."

Agnes looked at him evenly, and realized for the first time how much Frederic desired and even, in his own peculiar way, loved her. Raising her head, she looked into the future. The humans would not rebuild the cities in her lifetime, but there would be towns. The elves would one by one fade away, into wells, into trees, into small, pathetic beings who served mankind and were rewarded with dishes of milk. She would have children, and then grandchildren. She would grow old, and fat, and revered. She would desire Richard often. But she would never see him again.

"No," said Agnes firmly. "He's gone forever. The time for fairy-tales is past." ○

## We Ignore Him

with his iPod, the wires curled  
around his horns, two cloven hooves  
tapping the floor as he wriggles  
on the bus seat, head down and jouncing,  
proof that commuters can ignore anybody.  
He's long since quit the pipes—  
all that ethereal skirling by gods  
and mortal seducers—for the ravages  
of hip hop, the occasional death metal.  
No safer to be around than ever,  
despite the cubicle he inhabits  
beside yours, with those soft eyes  
and their hint of warm danger, and  
the restlessness that stirs in us  
just looking at him: after all,  
there still are rifts throughout  
this order, chaos behind the parking lots,  
abandon in the woods,  
fangs that can be put to good use.



# HUMAN DAY

Jack Skillingstead

Jack Skillingstead tells us "I was driving to work one day, listening to the radio, and heard the weatherman say that tomorrow was going to be a 'Human' day. Of course, he really said 'humid' day. But I thought it was a great title for a short SF story, so I wrote one to go with it."

Raymond held the loose eye in a cereal bowl. The eye looked like a big brown-and-blood-shot marble. It sounded like one, too, when he tilted the bowl. On the curvature opposite the pupil the interface shone like a gilded thumbprint. Robbie the Rover, a canine simulacrum Ray had designed in the image of a Golden Retriever, stood frozen by the workbench, left orbit gaping.

"Ready or not," Raymond said, "it's D-Day."

He pushed the eyeball into the open socket, regarded it critically, touched up the fur with a tiny makeup comb. He removed his glasses and wiped them on his shirt-tail, then put them back on and sighed.

"Dog day," he mumbled.

Robbie the Rover looked like a study in taxidermy.

Raymond worried his hands together. It was now or never, and it couldn't be never. He had been hiding in this secret underground shelter for almost a year. His supplies were depleted, the generator fuel nearly exhausted.

He had to find out what was happening up there in the world. Had to find out if they had finally taken over: his children of the Rift.

Raymond seated himself at the worktable and activated the remote control device. A red point of light glowed briefly in the simulacrum's left eye—the power-on indicator—then immediately faded out, so the illusion would not be compromised to the disappointment of his sweet little Samantha.

Of course, the light should have shone in both eyes. The right one was still not working. The screen on the controller setup flickered, flashed out, flickered again, and became steady. It displayed a flat image of Raymond seated before the remote control console, leaning forward, looking at himself looking at himself, through Robbie the Rover's eye.

Raymond turned in his chair and manipulated the controller. The fake dog padded over to him just like the real thing, looked up, cocked its head to the side, lolled its tongue, wagged its tail.

"Good boy," Raymond said.

He got up and shuffled in his slippers to the heavy door. Using the hand crank, he rolled it aside, greased wheels grinding. The tunnel beyond breathed stale air into his face. Coughing, he returned to the work table. Robbie the Rover stood by the chair. Raymond almost started to pet it, he was so lonely. Instead he sat down and took up the controller.

"Go be my eyes," he said. "My eye, I mean."

And he sent the simulacrum on its way to the world above.



His life depended on a toy. Samantha's toy. His daughter was gone but her toy remained durable.

It had begun the day the Mayovsky Accelerator erupted. Sam should not have been there. That was Raymond's fault. She was so damn *curious*. Daddy's girl, minus the twitchy eccentricities.

"What's it doing?" she had asked. They were standing together on the observation platform. "Are those big things magnets?"

Four gray metal blocks the size of economy cars tumbled on gimbals suspended above the floor. In the center of all that tumbling the air blurred, like worn fabric. A low frequency hum vibrated deep in their bones.

"Not magnets, exactly, sweetheart. It's something new, kind of a mini-super-collider. I'm rubbing at the onion skin between universes." As always Raymond had taken full credit, even for a project of this scope. Well, it *was* his money driving it. And it wasn't called the *Mayovsky* Accelerator for nothing.

"It looks like rubbing," Samantha said.

And then something like a funnel of light warped out of the blurred place and lashed upward, knocking Raymond off his feet. When he looked around, Sam was gone from the platform. They found her body beneath the tumbling blocks.

Raymond watched Robbie's progress on the rc screen. The dog made its way up twisty, chemically lit passages. When it reached the outer door it stopped. A featureless metal slab filled Raymond's screen. This blast door had not been opened once in the last year, not since Raymond had fled beneath the earth. You could do anything if you had enough money. Anything but the most important thing: prevent a death that had already occurred. Originally the shelter was Raymond's hedge against terror or environmental disaster; it had become his refuge from transdimensional invasion.

He stood up and pressed the lock release button for the outer door. When he resumed his seat, the rc screen presented the outline of the open door and the darkness beyond. He activated Robbie the Rover's night vision, and proceeded. As soon as the simulacrum was clear, Raymond shut the outer door and secured it.

Robbie climbed upward, eventually coming to the roughest section of the access tunnel. Here the passage was drilled through raw earth and rock, with no obvious shoring. Further on, Ray had to guide Robbie carefully into a tunnel not much larger than would allow a crawling man. If anyone were to stumble upon it, the access to his shelter would appear to be nothing more than a natural gap in the earth.

Robbie came out into a tangle of blackberry vines and dazzling sunlight. Ray killed the night vision. Past the brambles and weedy lot a highway crossed before a park. Beyond that the city rose against the sky. He thought for a minute, then put Robbie the Rover in rest mode. Better to wait for dark.

Robbie the Rover slept in the brambles, and Raymond slept in his secret shelter. Or tried to. He tended either to sleep constantly, or barely at all. This was a barely-at-all period. He pillowed his head on his folded arms and breathed slowly, too conscious of himself to relax. Finally, giving in to his anxieties, he sat back and knuckled his gummy eyes, reached for the remote and activated the monitor.

A quarter mile away, Robbie opened *his* eyes. Eye.

There was movement. Raymond leaned closer to the monitor. Nighttime had descended upon the world above. A figure approached through moonlight, coming straight for Robbie the Rover's bramble bed.

Discovered already!

For a moment, Raymond could do nothing. Then he tapped the auto-dog key, and

Robbie stood up and behaved like a real dog, without detailed direction from the rc. Sam would have loved this feature.

The approaching figure halted.

Robbie barked in a friendly way. He was incapable of barking in a threatening manner, being, essentially, a child's toy. Raymond had stocked his secret shelter for every contingency, including Samantha. Now loneliness was the final contingency. In another month *would* he have been petting Robbie? Fawning over its meticulously hand-woven fur?

On the monitor, the figure moved closer. It was a man, or what looked like a man. He was saying something. Raymond turned up the gain on Robbie's ears.

*There, boy, how'd you get yourself stuck in that mess, huh?*

The man carefully pulled apart loops and tangles of spiked vine.

Raymond nudged the controller, and the dog stepped out of the brambles and past the man.

*You're very welcome*, the man said.

Okay, he seemed human enough, but best to maintain distance.

Ray pushed the simulacrum forward at top speed, which amounted to something short of a trot. Robbie was into the street before Ray realized it. Sudden light splashed on the paving, a shadow swung, an engine roared. The view streaked violently, flipped around, froze on a new, cockeyed angle facing the sky. The moon shone like a crooked and lidded eye in a field of pale stars. The sound was gone. Raymond pushed, toggled and twisted the rc to no effect. He slumped back in his chair and pressed his palms to his temples, pressed hard enough to feel painful pressure. The image on the monitor stuttered and flipped and froze again, this time on a square of pavement. He redoubled the pressure on his temples, but only for a few seconds; he *knew*, of course, that there couldn't be a connection. He leaned close to the screen, squinting through his glasses. He held his breath a moment, then wondered what would happen if he held it for a certain number count, say one hundred, which would be uncomfortable and perhaps even impossible for him to reach without breathing, would *that* encourage the restoration of his link to Robbie? Yes, yes: it was just as irrational as the pressure thing. So what?

Before he could even start the count, the image came alive again. He was looking out of the back of a vehicle where, evidently, someone had placed the robot dog. The man from the brambles and another man stood framed in the opening. The speaker crackled. In a burst of static one of the men said: *Poor guy*. And the other said: *He ran right in front of me*.

Struck by the vehicle, then. But was he found out? No one referred to a broken mechanical dog as "poor guy."

The hatch came down, but before it could slam shut the image froze again. Raymond waited but didn't bother with temple-pressure or breath-holding magic. After all, he was a scientist, an inventor—a rational man. Anyone would have to give him that.

"Ray, you need help."

## MOVING?

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So his wife had said, or the Tonya-thing imitating his wife. Raymond had looked up from his bowl of cornflakes.

"Do I?" he said.

"Please, Ray."

She was convincing. The real Tonya had done a fair amount of pleading and histrionic hand-wringing as well. Oh, they were good. Raymond had lowered his gaze back to the cornflakes. Only a few remained, milk-soggy, unappetizing. He moved them around with his spoon.

The Tonya-thing said, "Jack called again. They're worried about you at the project." *I'll bet, he'd thought. Worried that I'm on to them. And they're correct to be worried.*

"Ray." It was turning on the crocodile tears. "I'm going to call your brother."

"Don't you do that." Raymond continued to stir his cornflakes. Something in his voice made the kitchen very quiet. He could hear the Tonya-thing breathing. "I don't want you to do that."

Now its breath hitched with suppressed sobs. It sounded *so much* like his Tonya. Raymond told himself not to look up, *begged* himself not to look up. The weeping continued.

Raymond looked up.

And his heart caved in a little. He could be wrong. What-might-be-Tonya saw the doubt in his eyes.

"Don't call Bill—yet," Raymond said. "Sit down first."

Tonya sat. Raymond worked his hands together, his palms sweaty. He removed his glasses and wiped the lenses on his shirttail.

"Listen," he said. "I know I have a history of . . . instability. I *know* that. But believe me, Tonya, believe me please, it has nothing whatsoever to do with what's happening now. And something *is* happening. Something dreadful."

"Samantha—"

"It isn't *about her*. Please just listen. Please."

She nodded, paying attention, encouraging him. And so he told her about the Mayovsky Accelerator experiments, about the rift they'd opened, the wound in the onion skin between universes. If you had enough money you could do anything—anything but raise the dead.

"This is the part that sounds crazy, that sounds, well, coincidental," he had said to Tonya. "Given my *history*, I mean. But coincidence isn't always meaningless, accidental. And just because somebody once displayed symptoms of paranoid delusional behavior, that doesn't mean that somebody couldn't be right, does it?"

Tonya shook her head, and in a very small voice said, "No."

"It doesn't mean *they* aren't here, for instance. You see what I'm saying?"

Tonya smiled one of her brave, brittle smiles, and that's when he had begun to retreat again. Retreat from the imitation Tonya.

"They—?" she said.

"Yes, yes. They. *THEY*. *Them*, if you prefer."

She flinched. He saw it, even though she tried not to show him.

Flinched.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I don't understand. What was coincidental?"

He sighed, dropped the spoon.

"Even if you were who you claim to be, you wouldn't believe me."

He threw his head back and stared at the ceiling. Time ticked by. The Tonya-thing touched the back of his hand, and he pulled away.

"Please don't touch me," he said. Then, still looking at the ceiling, he added: "I have no quantifiable data to prove anything. This is pure intuition. That's the beauty of it, at least from your perspective. There's no way to prove you've taken over. And pretty soon there won't be anyone to prove it *to*, anyway. You think I don't *know* that?"

Raymond came awake in the dark. The shelter lights automatically cycled off after an hour, if he didn't override the mechanism; it was an energy-conserving measure. He sat up abruptly, his heart thudding, a dream howling retreat down a black well in his mind. Groping out, his hand bumped the rc, and the monitor blinked out of sleep-mode. A moving image gathered. He was connected again! Robbie the Rover was prowling down a dark hallway, evidently on Natural Dog mode. Raymond activated the night vision. Open doorways appeared. It seemed to be an ordinary home. Another door suddenly opened at the end of the hallway, revealing a blaze of light and an emerging child in a nightgown. The girl, maybe nine years old, reached back and switched off the light. Robbie's night vision adjusted to the dramatic shift. The girl popped forward, green-ghostly, her eyes twin points. She was saying something, but Raymond couldn't hear her. The girl walked toward him, stooped over, reaching out. She was petting him.

Her voice barely a whisper, she was saying: *Good boy, good boy.*

Raymond tilted Robbie's head back slightly. The girl's face was difficult to read by night vision. A young child around nine years old. Samantha's age.

*Time to sleep, good dog.*

The screen went blank.

Raymond squinted, wiggled the controller, listened intently. But audio and visual were both gone. Unconsciously, Raymond touched his hair, muttered: *Good boy.*

Raymond was dozing, and someone was knocking on the door. Gradually he opened his eyes. The knocking continued. His eyes opened wider. He jerked his head to the right, looking across the shelter. Of course he could see nothing, the lights having cycled off again. Raymond slapped the override button next to the bed, and a couple of dim panels stuttered on. There was nothing to see. And no one was knocking on the door; the sound had to be coming from Robbie the Rover's remote display.

Raymond rolled off the bed and approached the table.

The monitor remained blank. He turned his head. The speaker hissed white noise at him. Had he *dreamed* the knocking?

He opened a drawer in the work table and removed the big clasp knife. At the door he pressed his ear to the cool metal and listened but could hear nothing. That didn't tell him anything. The shelter was like a bank vault. There could have been a brass band performing on the other side of the door, and he wouldn't have heard it. For that matter, he would not have been able to hear any knocking.

Raymond chewed his lip, wiped his sweaty palm on his thigh. He folded open the knife, then cranked the door part way aside, knife ready. Stale air and the empty tunnel. He listened for a while, then cranked the door shut again.

"Be a good dog," Raymond said, back in his chair before the remote.

He wiggled the cable connection. The monitor blinked on, showing a very low angle on a carpeted floor and a blank wall. Robbie was in rest-mode. A rectangle of rosy morning light lay upon the wall and carpet. A shadow, something unidentifiable, quivered in the rectangle. Sunlight passing through a curtain? A glass of water on the sill? Raymond slumped in his chair and watched the monitor. He considered activating Robbie, but waited. Time passed. His breathing resumed a restful rhythm. His mind dwelt on the quiver of light in a meditative way, as if he were a child on the dreamy precipice of sleep. A girl's voice said: *Let's go for a walk, boy.*

Auto-activated by her voice, Robbie the Rover switched to Natural Dog mode and stood up. Raymond heard a chain jingle. Then they were walking. Raymond kept his hand off the controls. The girl walked a little ahead, pulling the chain. She passed through a door, and Raymond followed after her.

It was a gorgeous day.

Brilliant sunshine, a verdant expanse of lawn, leaves flickering in a summer breeze. Raymond's heart ached a little; he had been underground a long time. The girl led him to a park. There were other children and dogs. *Real* dogs, no doubt. Even if the alien replacements didn't recognize him for what he was, *they* would—the real dogs.

But they didn't.

Raymond sat tense before the rc, as another little girl approached them with a dog of her own, a fidgety toy poodle. The smaller dog barked its head off. Rover remained aloof, his programming instructing him to refrain from excessive barking, even at the cost of verisimilitude. Raymond took over control and made Robbie bark a few times in his deep retriever voice. The poodle trotted behind him to sniff his asshole. This was it. At least this was it if he didn't do something.

He resumed manual control of Robbie the Rover, swung the artificial dog around, and made him bark. The poodle barked back and even snapped at Robbie's face.

"Cosette, come here!" the other girl shouted, and she pulled the toy poodle away. Raymond immediately suppressed Robbie's barking.

"Uh oh," the girl with the toy poodle said. She had picked up "Cosette" and was holding the little dog in her right arm as she quickly bent forward, reaching for something on the ground. Then her hand came up fast and she appeared to pet Robbie. The simulacrum was getting a lot of love. Raymond felt obscurely jealous.

"Nice doggy," the girl said, holding Cosette close. The poodle sniffed at Robbie, her face up close to the one functioning lens.

"What's his name?" the young girl said to *Raymond's* young girl.

"We don't know," she said. "My dad sort of found him."

"Are you keeping him?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you call him Mobia?" the other girl said. At least it sounded like "Mobia." Raymond clicked his tongue.

"Maybe," Raymond's girl said.

"Maybe *not*," Raymond said.

"I think they're okay together now," the other girl said. "Want to let them play?"

"Sure."

Raymond closed his eyes. Even on Natural Dog mode Robbie wouldn't be able to convincingly play with a real dog. Raymond opened his eyes and reached forward, intending to flip on Natural Dog anyway, since there was nothing else to do. The image on the monitor was bouncing wildly. For a moment he thought it was another malfunction in the video feed. But then he realized it was bouncing because Robbie was *running*. The mechanical toy dog was chasing the real toy poodle, gamboling around the park, randomly changing directions. Impossible. The simulacrum *couldn't* do that stuff. And besides, Raymond hadn't touched the controller. He watched until the poodle got tired of running and the two of them settled down. Then Raymond tried to resume direct control. It didn't work. He swiveled the joystick, snapped the toggle back and forth between Natural and Direct, all to no avail. Cosette sniffed Robbie's asshole to her heart's content, and Robbie returned the gesture. Raymond rocked back in his chair. "What the hell?" he said

After that the simulacrum remained beyond Ray's control. All he could do was watch. Which he did—obsessively. He sat for hours in front of the rc monitor. He ate his meals there, napped there. Robbie—renamed Mobia by his adoptive family—enjoyed a completely integrated life, or simulation of a life. Besides the little girl the family consisted of two adults, the man who had rescued Robbie and his wife. They all had weird names that Raymond could never quite hear. The man's name sounded

like *Gitzer*. The mother's name was *Natvizia*, or something. They both called the little girl by a name that sounded like *Spavitz*. Were they Romanian? Darker possibilities loomed. But whatever they were, they all doted on "Mobia." They petted him, played games with him, constantly told him what a good boy he was. At first Raymond was baffled. After a while his bafflement turned to envy. Mobia had a life; Raymond lived in a hole.

One day Raymond awakened from a nap and raised his face to a dead screen. His own haggard reflection stared back at him. He sat up in his creaky chair, his back stiff. He wiggled the cable connection on the back of the monitor, turned it on and off. Nothing helped. The screen remained blank.

The shelter felt smaller and lonelier than ever. Raymond played music to dispel the constant drone of the generator. Knowing depression would overcome him if he didn't stay active, he ran on the treadmill. It was hard to get started, but once he was jogging along he didn't want to stop. He ran until the sweat was pouring off his body and he could barely see from his salt-stinging eyes. He kept looking at the dark monitor, hoping it would come on. It didn't. He bargained with the Universe. If he could manage to run for an additional fifteen minutes the Universe would let the picture come back. After fifteen minutes, however, the monitor was still blank. Raymond extended the bargain to thirty minutes, then to an hour. He had already been on the treadmill for ninety minutes. He failed to make it to the end of the additional hour. His leg cramped, he stumbled and fell.

Clutching the twitching muscle in his calf, he began to cry. He dragged himself to the bed and lay there waiting for the pain to subside. Only the physical half of it did.

A girl was laughing. Raymond swam up out of churning dreams. A dog barked. He turned his head. Light poured from the monitor. Raymond rolled off the bed and stumbled over to the table, overwhelmed with relief.

The little girl, Spavitz or whatever her name was, knelt at the end of the hallway in the neat suburban-style home.

"Silly!" she said. "It came out again, didn't it."

She rolled something down the hardwood floor like a Lilliputian bowling ball. Red and brown and white, with a copper glint.

Robbie's eye.

Raymond stopped breathing. Robbie the Rover looked down at his own eye, then back up at the girl, who had come closer. "It's okay, Mobia. We'll just pop it back in. Unless you want to trade for a blue one." Spavitz hooked her index finger into the corner of her own eye—and *popped it out of the socket*.

Raymond made a strangling sound and shoved back from the table, almost overturning his chair. The girl held her blue eyeball up, comparing it to Robbie's brown one.

"No," Raymond said.

Spavitz pushed Robbie's eye into her own socket. The eye bulged, too big for the orbit, throwing off the symmetry of her face.

"Nope," she said. "Not gonna fit, boy."

Mobia barked.

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Spavitz hooked the eyeball out and thumbed it into the dog's head, then replaced her blue one.

"There," she said. "That's all better." And then she got very close to Robbie's good lens and spoke directly into it. "It's really all better now, Raymond."

Raymond gasped.

"You can come out now," the girl said.

Raymond shook his head. His mouth had gone dry.

"We know you're there," Spavitz said. "You can be one of us, like Mobia."

Raymond hit a button and the screen went black. He grabbed the power cord, yanked it out of the rc unit and flung it down like a dead snake.

Raymond sat on the edge of his bed, rubbing his eyes. He reached for the cup of cold tea he'd left on the floor. When? He'd lost track of time, grown gaunt. Many days had passed since he killed the rc unit. His mind alternated between irrational frenzy and dull resignation. Resigned to *what*, exactly, he couldn't have said. A half-eaten fiber biscuit lay on the bed next to his pillow. He picked it up and took a listless bite.

At the work table he slumped in his chair, facing the blank monitor.

"I know you're not real," he said. "There's no Spavitz, no Mobia, no Gitzer. No Donner or Blitzen or Rudolf, either, for that matter."

He bit into the stale biscuit, tore a hunk off, and chewed doggedly. His own haggard reflection watched him.

"I *know* you're not real," he said, spitting fragments of biscuit.

The cold light from a single panel dimmed, then brightened. Raymond looked around the confining shelter, his mouth open and half full of chewed biscuit. When the generator finally died he would be entombed in darkness with nothing but the sound of his own breathing. The shelter was vented to the surface, so there was no danger of suffocation, at least.

But to live in constant darkness . . .

Raymond washed down the biscuit with the remains of his tea, then bent over and picked up the power cord and plugged it back into the remote control. His fingers hovered over the On switch. He had to have one more look.

Raymond pushed the On button.

An image gathered. Warm afternoon sunlight quivered briefly on a distant wall, then the generator quit, stranding Raymond in the dark.

Raymond crawled through the narrow tunnel until he emerged blinking into sunlight like some lost and blinded thing.

A vehicle flashed by on the highway.

Raymond stood up in the prickly brambles and started to walk. When the rift opened *they* blended into the human population, made it stronger than it had ever before been. Perhaps it wasn't an invasion at all, but a miraculous relationship. That was the meaning of the warping funnel that killed Samantha. Her death was an accident in the service of a greater good; it was meaningful. And he, Raymond, must already be one of them. Otherwise how could he possibly have endured?

He stood at the edge of the highway and thought about Spavitz and her family in the sunny little house. They were more than human. Kinder, more durable, safer. From the park came the sound of children laughing and shouting. As yet no one had seen him; there was time to go back. He slipped the clasp knife out and folded it open. Was he one of them or not? He pulled up his shirt and placed the edge of the blade against his skin. After a moment he drew the blade across. What he saw astonished him. ○

Deborah Coates lives in Iowa where she works in information technology at a university. In addition to *Asimov's*, she has most recently been published in *Strange Horizons* and her short story, "Chainsaw on Hand" (*Asimov's*, March 2007), has just been reprinted in *Best American Fantasy 2*. In her new story, Deborah reminds us that there is a point in our lives when anything is possible, even . . .

# COWGIRLS IN SPACE

Deborah Coates

Jennie Low swore to God

—I swear to God, she'd say—

that the best cowgirls in the world were on the Chadron in Northwest Nebraska.

No one believed her. Most girls with any brains got out quick, spent their time before they left learning makeup tricks and how to walk in heels and leaving behind mother-of-pearl buttons and leather chaps and dust—oh god, the dust. But Jennie was a barrel racer—damn good one, too. Rode the circuit for a while all the way down to Texas, up to Montana. Did the Stampede once, though she said it wasn't worth it, said all she wanted the whole time she was there was to get back home.

These days Jennie ranched on twelve hundred acres her father gave her and taught barrel-racing on Thursday evenings in the summer to little girls from all the hell over. Wouldn't take a dime for it, neither. Not one penny. So, people left her things. She was always finding hand-stitched quilts and crocheted shawls—one time a whole goddamned porch set made from rough-hewn timber—in the damndest places.

"Wouldn't trade it for anything," Jennie said. And she meant it. But there were times—oh, yes, times—when she sure as hell missed the Junkyard Girls.

Martha'd thought the name was stupid way back, should have called themselves the Junkyard Dogs. "Hell of a lot meaner," she'd said. "Junkyard Girls—" her lip had curled. "What's mean about that?"

"We're not trying to be mean," Pen had told her patiently. "We're just trying to, well . . . be."

Because for Pen always—probably still today even though she'd got out awhile ago—being was just the hardest damn thing in the world.

The Junkyard Girls were a horse drill team and for three years in high school they'd ridden practically every summer parade within three hundred miles. They'd practiced at Cass Salvage—which was where they got the name—because it was close by Pen's. And Martha could ride to it if she had to, which she usually did. They'd been good at it, had gone all the way over to Lincoln right after graduation for a state competition where they took second place even though Martha'd gone out

with a fake ID that wouldn't have fooled a blind woman the night before and brought back a case of the cheapest local beer she could find. They'd all had hangovers the next day, except Pen. Rode like hell anyway. Because they were the Junkyard Girls and horses and how to ride them were what they knew.

Jennie hadn't seen any of the Junkyard Girls for pretty nearly eight years, so she'd mostly given up thinking they might all get together again, maybe ride the Scottsbluff parade some Fourth of July.

So, it took her completely by surprise when Pen called her right the hell out of the blue.

It was a Wednesday morning and it was raining, cold and miserable, and Jennie was glad for once she didn't have to be out in it. 'Course working on the books in the back office with the space heater going all out wasn't exactly the best time she'd ever had either.

Price of cattle was down again, which it always was. You'd think it would have to go up once in awhile, otherwise why wasn't she paying them just to take the cattle off her hands? But, whatever, Jennie didn't ranch to get rich and some days that was a damn good thing.

It was a little after noon when the phone rang. She answered it with her mind half on something else because she expected it to be John Criker from down to Harrison with some prices on the extra hay she'd asked him to look out for.

"Jennie? Hey, it's me. Pen."

"Jesus," Jennie said.

"What?"

"I mean, what the hell, Pen? It's been forever."

"I'm sorry," Pen said. "I mean, I know it's been awhile. But time just—"

"No, damn, Pen," Jennie said. "I mean it's good to hear from you."

"Oh." Jennie could hear phones ringing in the background. "Hmmm," Pen said. "Look, I'm at work and I've got a meeting in, like, ten minutes." Pen did something—Jennie could never remember what—at some big tech firm in Sioux City. "Have you seen the news? The thing in China?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Pen?"

Through the almost inaudible buzz of the rural phone line, Pen sighed. "The thing," she said. "The. Thing. They've found one in China."

Well.

"What the hell, Pen!"

And this time Jennie meant it.

"Yeah," Pen said after a short pause. "I'm coming up there this weekend. You need to call Big Patti. And the Sisters, too."

"Big Patti's out in California," Jennie said.

"Tell her to come." There was a brief pause; Jennie heard sharp voices in the background. "Look, I've got to go," Pen said. "I'll be there Saturday."

If anyone asked her, Pen would have told them that Jennie was in charge—Captain of the Junkyard Girls—she'd been the one who made up the routines, who called the practices, who jumped on the other girls for messy tack or wearing the wrong jeans. Anything Pen was involved in she'd always say—and pretty much believed—someone else, someone more noticeable, more willing to stand in front, was in charge. But Jennie'd known since second grade—it was always Pen who called the shots.

The Sisters were easy to get ahold of. Callie was just down in Scottsbluff and Sallie ("It's Sarah now, jeez, just call me Sarah") was out in Laramie. Jennie'd heard she was getting married come June, but she didn't say anything about that on the phone. All she said when Jennie told her was, "Shit, have you talked to Pen?"

After the phone calls she turned on the television and let it run in the background while she scanned the Internet. The news reports were vague and Jennie might have missed them completely if Pen hadn't called.

Mystery Object Found In Qinghai Province, China

... defies analysis ...

Village of Miracles

... international experts to examine ... baffled and excited ... like nothing ...

The rain had settled into a cold drizzle when Jennie saddled up the piebald and headed out to the north meadow. She had no particular chore in mind beyond a need to get out, to have open space around her. She snugged her slicker up around her neck and ducked down into the damp. The pie was a new horse picked up less than a week ago at auction. She didn't have a feel for him yet, nor him for her, and she let herself focus on that for a bit, his response to the rein and her knees and her shifting weight in the saddle.

The sky was gray—hard to tell it was only mid-afternoon, felt like evening, like the whole world was waiting, like Jennie had been waiting and told herself she wasn't, for years.

"What would be the best thing ever?" Sallie had asked that one hot July day when they were taking a break from the new routine down the back end of the junk yard. Pen was loading her saddle and Martha's into the little red pickup her father had given her on her last birthday, an easy swing followed by a hollow thump and the thin clatter of stirrup and leather.

"Sex with Joe Callahan," her sister said.

"You've already had sex with Joe Callahan." Martha was stretched out on the hood of a white Cadillac, straw cowboy hat pulled down over her face, but it wasn't hard to figure she was rolling her eyes when she said it.

"Yeah," Callie said, "And it was awesome."

"Going to the moon," Pen said.

Martha sat up. "There's nothing on the moon," she said. "It's just, like, dust and cold and shit. Aliens," she said. "Aliens would be way cooler." She slid off the car hood and stretched. Jennie could see her ribs through the thin white T-shirt she was wearing.

"Aliens here or us on an alien planet?" Pen asked.

"Oh, us there," Martha said. "I mean, shit, an alien planet? Who wouldn't want that?"

"I wouldn't," Callie said, crunching ice between her teeth.

"Well, you ..." This time Jennie could see Martha roll her eyes. "You think sex with creepy Joe Callahan is cool."

"He's not creepy!"

"He's a sex-obsessed little punkassed jerk."

Callie scrambled to her feet. Sallie, as she always did, followed. "Jesus, Martha," Callie shouted. "Jesus! Why do you always ruin everything?"

The sisters stalked away, back toward the office, Callie vibrating outrage from every fiber of her being, though Jennie knew she'd be back with fresh ice and another soda in five minutes laughing with her sister as if nothing had just happened.

"I want to see the Earth from orbit. To stand on the moon. I want to go to Mars and see the rings of Saturn. And I don't care if there are aliens. I don't. I just want ... I want to go." Pen spoke as if there hadn't just been shouting, as if she'd been so caught up inside her head that she hadn't noticed the entire exchange between Martha and Callie.

Jennie and Martha looked at her and for once even Martha didn't quite know

what to say. Though it didn't stop her from saying it anyway. "Jesus, Pen, what the hell are you talking about?"

Pen blinked, like she didn't realize she'd spoken out loud. She opened her mouth but before she could say she didn't mean it or she was just kidding or something else spectacularly untrue, there was a sharp clang of metal on metal followed by a resounding crash as a stack of old car doors tipped sideways ten feet or so behind where Pen was sitting.

"Shit!" Martha said as Big Patti emerged from the narrow space between an old Studebaker and a rusted out green and yellow pickup.

"What?" Patti said. She had a streak of grease across her left cheek and her hat—which she was no longer wearing—had probably left it in an old car somewhere and they'd all have to look for it later—had plastered her bangs flat against her forehead. "I found an old pickup I think's got the door I'm looking for," she said. "Plus," she jerked a thumb over her shoulder, "I found something *really* interesting back there."

Patti was not the reason that the drill team was called the Junkyard Girls or why they practiced their routines at the junkyard on the old highway south of Harrison, but, damn, did she love junk. She'd gotten her daddy to give her his old 1975 F150 pickup truck that had been rusting out behind the barn for the better part of the last twenty years and she was rebuilding it piece by loving piece. She was always dragging back old bumpers or brake cables or, once, a cylinder from a Duesenberg engine from the 1930s that Patti claimed could top out at 140 miles per hour.

"No one cares!" Martha'd told her once. "No one ever cares! Why do you keep showing us this stuff?"

But Jennie had stood up and said, "Of course we care."

At the same time Callie had said, "Why are you so mean, Martha? My god, can't you just be nice for one single second!"

Patti pretty much ignored them all, continued to dig through the junkyard and bring the girls her "finds," which they routinely ignored.

So, no one paid much attention when Patti said she'd found something interesting in the junkyard.

"Let me guess," Martha said. "You found a double-overhead, chrome-plated, mint-condition toothpick holder from 1934." Then, she laughed. "Ha. Ha, I kill me," she said.

This time Jennie rolled her eyes. "What did you find?" she asked.

Patti had an old towel drawn through one of her belt loops and she pulled it out and wiped her hands on it.

"We ought to—" Pen started.

"It's too hot, Pen." Martha cut right across whatever she was going to say. "The horses are already unsaddled and no one wants to go over routines for the hundred and fiftieth time. Give it a rest!"

Pen looked up at her and sighed. She looked at Big Patti. "What did you find?" she asked, echoing Jennie.

Big Patti looked at each of them in turn. There was a certain flatness to her expression, a certain flatness to her generally, as if she was living half a second out of sync. She wasn't dumb, more like the world was a place she didn't really understand most of the time. "Yeah," she said and stuck the towel back through her belt loop. "I can show you."

Callie and Sallie were still up at the office, but no one suggested waiting for them to come back. Callie would just say it was too hot and messy besides and Sallie would opt to stay with her because Callie never liked to be alone.

Patti led them back between narrow rows of crushed cars stacked twelve and fourteen high, crushed Cadillacs and Ford pickup trucks and Chevy Malibus, an open

space in the middle with an intact Volkswagen bus, painted lime green with all the windows broken out. Jennie thought she'd been through the entire junkyard, but she hadn't seen the bus before and she had started toward it when Patti said, "No, over here," and took them back past more stacks of crushed cars into the old section that was all jumbled parts and old tires and the stink of standing water.

"Jesus, Patti," Martha griped, wiping her hand on her jeans. "Why do you even come back here?"

Patti shrugged. "There's good stuff back here," she said, like *duh*.

"Shit," said Martha.

"Holy shit," said Jennie, because she'd just spotted what Big Patti'd brought them back there to see—a faded blue pickup chassis—tires gone, headlights gone, everything gone but the metal body and that rusted spectacularly along the sides, front bumper half off and bent in the center, none of that remarkable or noteworthy among the hundreds of other old trucks in the yard.

The thing worth noticing, that caused Martha to echo Jennie's "holy shit" when she finally looked, was a yellow-green glow leaking out from underneath the hood. "What the hell is it?" Martha asked.

Big Patti shrugged. "Dunno. Haven't looked yet," she said.

Martha took off her hat and swiped her forearm across her face. "Well, hell," she said, walked up to the front of the truck, reached though the grille for the hood latch and, "Shit," she said.

"Already tried that," Patti said.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Martha demanded, sucking on her knuckles where she'd barked them pulling her hand out.

Patti shrugged. "You didn't ask."

Pen, precise and neat, surprised them all by lying flat on the ground and sliding underneath the far side where the truck body was canted up on an old set of livestock panels. Martha tossed her hat on the hood of the truck and dove in after her.

Muffled curses and sharp instructions could be heard from Martha.

"Jesus!" Martha said. Then silence.

It wasn't until Pen was all the way out from under the truck and standing that Jennie saw that she had something in her hand. It was green and glowing, pulsing like a heartbeat—beat, beat, beat. Not round or square, but . . . pliable, loose.

"What the hell?" Jennie said.

"Feel it." Pen grinned, which was remarkable all on its own. Jennie slowly put her hand out, aware even then—even then—before anything had happened that this was big, beyond the realm of junkyards and drill teams and cowgirls in Nebraska in July.

Jennie laid a careful finger on the thing and immediately she felt a cool warmth spread up her finger into her hand. She jerked her hand back. "Pen," she began.

"It's okay," Pen said. "I think it's okay."

"Let me have it," Martha said, elbowing Jennie aside. Pen passed it over willingly enough though the thing seemed to stick to her fingers, stretching then separating as Martha pulled away. It didn't feel sinister, though, and Jennie wondered what that meant, why she'd even had that thought when she'd only touched it once and besides it was just a thing, a weird glowing thing. Why would it be sinister?

Martha stretched it until it seemed like it would snap, but it didn't. She let it lay in the palm of her hand and it slowly curled itself up into a ball.

"Huh," Pen said.

"What is it?" Martha asked.

Jennie could hear Callie and Sallie calling for them back up by the office. "We better get back," she said, throwing one more long look at the green glowing ball of whatever.



"Shit," said Martha. She picked up her hat and waved it like a fan in front of her face. "I wish it wasn't so damn hot," she said.

A hot July wind came up as they made their way back, swirling gritty dust up into their faces. "Give that thing to me," Big Patti said to Martha as they clambered over an old truck bed.

"What? Why?"

"Because I found it," Big Patti said and with a deep sigh Martha handed it to her. Big Patti stuffed it in her shirt pocket.

"What are you going to do with it?" Jennie asked.

Patti shrugged. "Figure out what it does, I guess."

"Oh yeah," Pen said, nodding. "We can do that." Pen and Patti were the two best science students in the school—Patti more about putting things together and taking them apart and Pen more about the theory and the future. Jennie wasn't sure that anyone else knew—even Martha—but Pen dreamed about being an astronaut—seriously. She had a whole list at home of the things she'd need to do to get into the program at NASA. Jennie figured Big Patti would follow right along and build the rockets.

By the time they reached the main office, the wind was strong enough to push against them as they walked. Martha had one hand jammed down on her hat to keep it from flying away. Pen and Jennie had taken their hats off and were carrying them.

"Load up!" Jennie had to shout for the others to hear her. Clouds were moving in from the west and it would probably be raining before any of them got home. The horses balked at the rising wind and the steady bash and clatter of old metal doors. By the time Jennie got back home, the rain was steady, sheeting nearly sideways in the wind. The whole storm lasted almost three days, long enough to wash out the middle of the three-mile track that led to Martha's house. She had to ride her horse out the rest of the summer and wait for Pen to pick her up on the way to the junkyard or a parade or pretty much anywhere.

Jennie finally got hold of Big Patti on Thursday and drove up to the Rapid City airport on Friday afternoon to pick her up. Jennie almost hadn't recognized her—a red power suit and heels, for god's sake! What the hell? But Patti'd grabbed her luggage off the carousel and ducked into the bathroom and when she came out she was wearing blue jeans and a faded red T-shirt and a barn coat that had been washed enough times that the green had leached to gray and that had felt familiar, real, to Jennie. She could figure out where she stood when things looked the way she thought they ought to look, or at least a way she recognized.

"Did you bring it?" she asked Patti as they were winding down out of the Black Hills.

"Well, yeah," Patti said. She didn't look at Jennie as she spoke. The half-cracked window blew strands of hair back and away from her face, like they were trying to escape the bounds of gravity. Several miles passed, the only sound the steady thrum of tires on pavement. Then, Patti turned toward her and said, "Think Pen's right? Think there's another one?"

"I hope to Jesus not," Jennie said. "But . . ."

"Yeah . . ." Patti turned back to the window. "Pen coming?"

"Tomorrow," Jennie said.

"All right," Patti said. Then, "All right." Like a promise and a curse.

Callie was at the ranch before 7:30 the next morning, already talking the minute she walked through the kitchen door. "Where's the coffee? My god! I swear I'm never going drinking again, but Randy said, 'Oh, sweetie, let's just—' Patti, you look great, you look— Can you believe this!" She finally stopped and turned around, the coffee pot in one hand and a cracked ironstone mug in the other. "Pen's not just making things up, is she?"

Jennie rolled her eyes and didn't even bother to hide it. "It was on the news, Cal."  
"Oh," Callie shrugged. "Well . . ." She pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "Have you talked to Sallie?"

"Haven't you?"

"Oh, hell," And there was something sharp and indefinable underlying the words. She shrugged. "We don't talk," she said. She grabbed the mug in both hands and raised it to her lips, then she just sat there, staring at either nothing or Big Patti. Jennie couldn't tell.

"Do you ever—" Callie said softly after a few minutes of silence. "I mean, sometimes . . ." She looked up. "I still think about Martha, you know?"

Like we don't, Jennie wanted to say. Like every minute of the day?

Patti's chair screeched on the old linoleum floor.

"Shit—" Callie began.

"I'm going for a ride," Big Patti interrupted her and didn't look at either one of them before walking out the door.

"Was it something I said?" Callie looked at Jennie.

Jennie didn't answer. She stood at the sink and watched Patti jump the corral fence like she did it all the time. She raised her hand and Old Boy was there, like he'd been expecting her, like Patti hadn't left him years ago and moved to California, like time had somehow just stood still.

It had been late fall, still warm, but most of the leaves off the trees and the afternoon light brittle and thin, shadows longer than they'd been, the promise of winter underlying everything. It was still warm in the sun, but in the shade of hollowed out old pickup trucks it was cold. Jennie'd snugged her jacket up around her neck.

They'd figured out pretty quick what the Thing did.

"Dude, it invents reality," Martha'd said. "That's awesome!"

"Bad things happen," Jennie'd said. "You wanted cooler weather; it flooded out the roads."

"I know," Martha said. "It was awesome."

"It's dangerous. What about when Patti wanted Mark Hafhalt to ask her to the dance?"

"I didn't want Mark—"

"What was wrong with that?" Martha asked, her hands on her hips and her stance wide, like she expected angels to descend and knock her down.

"Shelly Waskowski was in the hospital for three weeks!"

"She was in a car accident."

Jennie pointed, "Because that—that—Thing made it happen. You know it did."

"We just have to be smart, think things through. I mean someone invented this Thing. It wasn't because they wanted to flood the world or push deer in front of cars." Pen hadn't spoken at all for the last half hour, so when she did finally say something even Martha stopped talking and listened.

And they'd talked about it, researched it—Pen said there was no account of anything like it anywhere—and figured out one big last spectacular thing.

"We've got to do it!" Martha'd said. "I mean, Jesus! Why not?"

And that was what had gotten them here, in the middle of the junkyard on a windy fall day, the wind sandpapering across their faces.

"We should get rid of it." Callie huddled in her jacket on a ratty blanket she'd scrounged from the office.

"Get rid of it?" Big Patti just looked at her, like what she'd said didn't even make sense.

"Shit," said Martha, "Nobody made you come."

"Jesus, Martha—" Sallie began.

"Quit," Pen said, didn't even raise her voice, but everybody shut up.

"Anyone who wants to go should go now," Pen said. She didn't look at any of them when she said it.

Jennie looked at Pen. The slanted light made the bones in her face stand out. Afterward, she accused Pen of being selfish; she'd wanted it to be about Pen, about intelligence and ambition and forcing the world to make a place for her. But they were all there, they'd all wanted to be part of something *that* big.

No one left.

"All right," Pen said. "All right." The Thing lay on a folded blanket in front of her. It had changed shape slightly with every Request they'd made—most of which they hadn't realized were Requests, just saying things with the Thing in their hands. It was a little less pliable, a little more angular, but still green and yellow and glowing.

"Okay," Pen said, her hands hovering just above the Thing. "This is it. This is—"

"Yeah," Martha said impatiently. "The big Request. We know. Get on with it."

"Okay," Pen said and took a big breath. "If you're going," she said. "You have to be touching it." Everyone reached in and put a finger on the Thing, except Callie. Sallie raised an eyebrow, took her finger off, put it on, took it off again.

"Oh for god's sake," Callie said. "Do what you want." Callie had gotten ahold of the Thing one day mid-summer and Requested red cowboy boots and a barrel racing saddle, which her father gave to her three days later when he came home and announced he and their mother were getting a divorce and he was marrying the check-out girl at the Swift Spot on Highway 40. Callie'd been off the Thing pretty much ever since.

Sallie gave a huff and sat back.

"Okay," said Pen. "Okay?" No one else moved. "Okay." Another deep breath. "We want to visit an alien planet. We want to be able to eat, breathe, live there. Nothing bad happens to any of us." She looked directly at Callie. "Not to anyone who goes or anyone who doesn't. Not to anyone we know or anyone we don't know."

Right that second, right before the last word was completely out of Pen's mouth, Jennie pulled her hand away. She'd never been able to explain it down the years—because she didn't really believe in the Thing, because she thought it was all doomed to disaster, because it wasn't her Request, belonged to Pen and Martha and Big Patti?

Because she did.

Afterward, when everyone had a reason for what happened, had an accusation about something done or not done, Pen had said she hadn't put coming back in the original Request because they were taking the Thing with them. A whole lot later—years later—Jennie realized Pen hadn't included coming back because Pen hadn't intended to return.

Jennie and the others always thought the consequences had been pretty damned obvious from the start. But now, she realized that maybe they weren't, maybe it had actually played out in subtler and harsher ways. Martha was gone, sure. But she was okay, she was, Pen had stipulated it. Pen wasn't okay. Big Patti either. Mid-level job at a big anonymous tech firm? Totally not Pen. California? Red power suits? Big Patti'd never touched that F-150 again, never set foot in a junkyard again as far as Jennie knew.

"It was always Pen's fault. We all knew it."

"What?" Jennie startled at Callie's words, like their thoughts were running together down the past, each to a different end.

"Jesus Christ, Callie, just shut the hell up." Sallie walked into the kitchen, slamming the outside door behind her. In high school, she'd done her best to look just like

Callie—same hair cut, same clothes. But now—short straight hair, red with gold highlights—she was all bone and angles, sharp and spiky where Callie'd grown soft and round.

"Well, I'm just saying." Callie's fingers playing nervously with her coffee mug, fingernails tapping against the porcelain, a sharp, hollow sound.

Jennie rose and went to the window. Big Patti'd returned, hung her saddle on the fence and was climbing over with a bridle in one hand and Old Boy nudging at the back of her leg, like he could talk her into staying a little longer. She'd slung a leg across the rail and was getting ready to jump to the ground when she stopped and Jennie saw her dig a phone out of her pocket.

"We didn't even go," Callie was saying behind her.

"For god's sake, Cal," Sallie said. "Why are you here, then?"

Callie didn't answer. Because she knew, Jennie thought, like they all knew. It was the Junkyard Girls who found that Thing. It was the Junkyard Girls who used it. They, all of them, knew what it did, the price it exacted, and what was going to happen in the world now that another one was out there.

"Because," Callie began, her voice dying on the end of the word.

"Because you're not as big a moron as everyone says you are," Sallie said sharply. "Because you're not as scared as you think you are. Because you care."

"Who says I'm a moron?" Callie said. "Besides you—" And then she laughed, like it had been startled out of her, and Sallie laughed a little too and Jennie figured that was probably the nicest they'd been to each other since Sallie'd moved to Laramie.

"Where's Pen?" Callie said.

*Shit.* Jennie looked at her watch. Pen should have been here an hour ago.

She was halfway to picking up the phone when it rang.

"Pen? Where are you?"

"Almost— Look, there has to be a way to get it right."

"Well, that's . . . isn't that what we're going to talk about?"

Pen sighed. "Before—if I had paid the price it would have been worth it, you know? It would have been—"

"Whatever that Thing is, wherever it came from," Jennie's voice rose, her words coming quick, like she had to get them all out now. "I don't think it was a gift. I think it was, I think it's supposed to destroy us."

"Destroy the world, you mean?"

"Yes, what—?" But Jennie knew that for Pen and Big Patti and Martha—always Martha—there had been a before—scholarships, fellowships, futures all change-the-world bright. And after—mid-level tech girl, the fake success of a red power suit, and gone, just gone.

"This time," Pen said, her voice fierce in a way Jennie'd never heard before. "I'm going to get it right." And she closed the connection.

Jennie said later that she knew right then. Said it afterward, if anyone had cared. She heard the car, looked out. Pen looked exactly the same as she had the last time Jennie saw her—blond hair, blue jeans, shirt ironed like someone had used a ruler. She never looked toward the house and Jennie knew, she knew, had probably known since Pen called on Wednesday.

"Shit." She was out the door and halfway across the lawn with Callie and Sallie scrambling confused behind her and she was too late, had known she would be too late before she started to move. Big Patti met Pen halfway, held out her hand, greeny-yellow glowing between her fingers. Pen grinned at her, actually grinned, took her hand and—

"Pen!" Jennie skidded to a stop. Between one second and the next, Pen and Big Patti disappeared, so abrupt that the bridle in Big Patti's hand was still dropping to

the ground in a puffed-up cloud of dust. That was what Jennie remembered the clearest, the bridle falling, slow, like time had nearly stopped, the quick puff of dust when it hit the ground, the sound coming after.

And Jennie and Callie and Sallie all standing there, frozen.

Three weeks later, after the pictures from China, after the hole where the customs building had been, after it was clear that Pen and Big Patti were gone, Jennie saddled up Old Boy and Pen's horse, who never, as far as Jennie knew, had a name. She was mounted on Old Boy, ponying Pen's horse behind when Sallie drove up in a swirl of dust. She didn't say anything, just grabbed the reins from Jennie and mounted up. She was wearing old jeans and a pair of dusty cowboy boots that Jennie'd have bet she hadn't worn in years.

After a few minutes of silence, Jennie asked, "Callie—?"

"Yeah," Sallie said, the creak of the saddle providing a quiet counterpoint to the slow swish-swish of each horse's tail. "She won't come. She's already pretending none of this happened. Ever."

"They're not dead," Jennie said.

"I know."

"We should have been—" Sallie started after awhile.

"Yeah," Jennie said. "Yeah."

They didn't talk much more until they'd ridden clear up Pants Bluff, tethered the horses and lay on their backs against the sun-warmed rocks, watching clouds and miles-high airplane trails, sky fading out to pale gray at the edges of their vision.

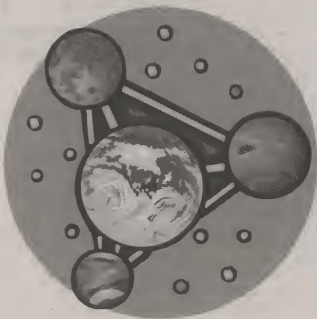
"I swear to god," Jennie said.

"Oh yeah," Sallie agreed. And smiled. ○

## BRIDGES

space elevator, they call it:  
superstrong composite cable, spun  
from carbon nanotubes, then  
flung into space,  
some vast Indian rope trick, or  
lowered from orbit  
like Rapunzel's hair,  
then anchored at both ends,  
earth & geosynchronous platform,  
counterbalanced; payloads could  
readily be carried to  
& from orbit, & then beyond.

but it's not, i think, elevator  
so much as the first short strand  
of a vast spiderweb,  
soon to span the planets in  
intricate, spinning transport nets  
shining black as coal, then  
later, perhaps, linking the stars  
with sparse extensions  
of long, lonely lines.



—Peter Roberts

*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* credits Damien Broderick with coining the term “virtual reality” in the novel *The Judas Mandala*. *The Dreaming Dragons*, runner-up for a Campbell Memorial prize, is listed in David Pringle’s *SF: The 100 Best Novels*. Although he holds a two-cultures PhD from Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia, Damien lives these days with his wife, Barbara Lamar, in San Antonio and Lockhart, Texas, where he is writing short fiction after a break of several decades. The author is gratified to see one of those new stories in the 400<sup>th</sup> *Asimov’s* and is already planning a sequel for the 1000<sup>th</sup>. That may give us just enough time to prepare for the paradigm switch that brings about the strange future of . . .

# THIS WIND BLOWING, AND THIS TIDE

Damien Broderick

*“Has any one else had word of him?”*

*Not this tide.*

*For what is sunk will hardly swim,*

*Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.*

—“My Boy Jack,” Rudyard Kipling (1915)

**T**he starship was old, impossibly old, and covered in flowers. Despite a brisk methane breeze, not a petal nor a stamen of the bright blooms moved. Under an impervious shield, they remained motionless, uncorrupted, altogether untouchable.

“They’re alive,” reported the Navy remote viewer. When I was a kid, the idea that the armed services might employ a trained, technologically enhanced psychic would have got you a derisive smack in the ear from your elders and betters, even though the American CIA ran a remote viewing program called Star Gate back in the last century, before they ostentatiously closed it down and took it to black ops. This viewer was blind to light, but saw better than the rest of us, by other means, on a good day. Like me, sort of, in my own itchy way.

He stood at the edge of the huge, flower-bedecked vessel, gloved, open palms held out-



ward, his hands vibrating ever so slightly, like insect antennae hunting a pheromone. "It's amazing. Those blossoms are still alive, after . . . what . . . millions of years? I can't find my way in yet, but I can detect that much even through the stationary shield."

"Is that the same as a, you know, *stasis field*?" I asked the marine master sergeant standing guard beside us. I turned to face her, and bobbed sickeningly. Two days ago I had been on Ganymede, and on Earth's Moon before that. Now I walked on another world entirely, around yet another world entirely. It wasn't right for a man as ample as I to weigh so little, especially with Titan's bruised-peach air pushing down on me half again as heavily as Earth's. It went against nature. Even with the bodyglove wrapping me, and an air tank on my back, I only weighed about eighteen kilos—say forty pounds. A tenth of what the scales would show back home.

"'Stasis' my ass! That's sci-fi nonsense," she barked. "Media technobabble. Like your own—" She bit the rest of her sentence off, perhaps fortunately. "This here is hard science."

"So sorry."

"And please don't speak again without an invitation to do so, Sensei Park. We don't want to put Mr. Meagle off his stroke."

Opening his startlingly blue, blind eyes, the Navy viewer laughed. The sound echoed oddly in his bodyglove and through our sound loop. All sounds did, out on the orange-snowy surface of Titan. "Let him natter on, Marion. I'm entangled now. You'd have to cut my head off and pith my spine to unhook me from this baby."

I wondered idly how either of them would respond if I told them I was the reason, or at least the proximate occasion, that they were here. They'd regard me as a madman, probably. My role in developing the portage functor was under cover about as deep as any since the creation of the US Office of Strategic Services in 1945, long before the CIA got tight with clairvoyants. Perhaps these people already did consider me deluded. Yeah, it was true that I'd told them where to look for the starship, but it wasn't as if I had the credentials of a remote viewer, so undoubtedly it was just an accident. Right.

I felt the pressure of the thing, its causal gravitas, as I gazed down at the starship. If that's what it was, under its stationary shield and floral tribute.

This thing on Titan had been tugging at me, at my absurd and uncomfortable and highly classified gift, since I was four or five years old, running in the streets of Seoul, playing with a Red Devils soccer ball and picking up English and math. A suitable metaphor for the way a child might register the substrate of a mad universe, and twist its tail. My own son, little Song-Dam, plagued me with questions when he, too, was a kid, no older than I'd been when the starship buried under tons of frozen methane and ethane had plucked for the first time at my stringy loops.

"If light's a wave, Daddy, can I surf on it?" Brilliant, lovely child! "No, darling son," I said. "Well, not exactly. It's more like a Mexican football wave, it's more like an explosion of excitement that blows up." I pulled a big-eyed face and flung my arms in the air and dropped them down. "Boom!" Song laughed, but then his mouth drooped. "If it's a wave, Dad, why do some people say it's made of packets?" "Well," said I, "you know that a football wave is made of lots and lots of team supporters, jumping up and sitting down again." He wasn't satisfied, and neither was I, but the kid was only five years old.

Later, I thought of that wave, sort of not there at all at one end, then plumping up in the middle, falling to nothing again as it moved on. Follow it around the bleachers and you've got a waveform particle moving fast. Kind of. But for a real photon, you needn't follow it, it's already there, its onboard time is crushed and compressed from the moment of launch to the final absorption, just one instantaneous blip in a flattened, timeless universe. Why, you could jump to the Moon, or Ganymede, or even Titan, all in a flash. Just entangle yourself with it, if you knew how (as I showed them how, much later), like Mr. Meagle remote viewing his impenetrable stationary starship.

Physics—you're soaking in it!

"I can likely get more now sitting in my relaxation cell back at Huygens," Meagle said. He looked very calm, as if he'd just stepped out of an immersion tank, but there was a faint quivering around his blind eyes. I watched his face in my viewmask, as if neither of us wore gloves over our heads. The man was exhausted. "So tell me, Mr. Park," he said, as we turned and made our way to the big-wheeled jitney, "what were your own impressions, sir?" Scrupulous about not front-loading me with hints of his own; I liked that.

"Anyone, or any *thing*, who loves flowers that much," I said judiciously, "can't be all bad."

Huygens had provided me with a customized broad-beamed sanitary personal; I have authoritative hams, and a wide stance. It degloved me with slick efficiency. I relieved myself with a gratified sigh. While bodygloves have the capacity to handle such impositions of the mortal order, the experience is undignified and leaves a residual aroma trapped inside with one's nostrils, so I tend to hold on. We had been outside for hours without a pit stop. The sanitary squirted and dabbed, removed sweat from my perspiring hide with its dry tongue, dusted powder across the expanse, set me free. I dressed in my usual unflattering robe, and made my way directly to the commissary bubble. I was starving.

Banally, the wall&ceiling display showed a faux of thrice-magnified Saturn, four hand-widths across, tilted optimally to show off the gorgeous ring system. I'd just seen the reality outside, with nothing between me and the ringed planet itself but a protective film and a million or so kilometers of naked space above the bright Xanadu regional surface where we'd stood. Since we were almost at the equator, Saturn's belt had been a thin glitter in the photomultipliers in our bodyglove masks (and would be invisible to the naked eye), directly overhead, right and left of the primary's waist, not truly impressive. Of course, even with the high frequency step-downs of the photomultipliers, the atmosphere looks hazy anyway.

This magisterial feed on the wall was probably coming, today, from one of the polar sats keeping an eye on the big feller. It seemed to me a bit tacky, a lame pretence, but then again, Titan is tidally locked, so it must get a tad wearying for the regular staff, seeing exactly the same thing in the sky forever, whatever installation dome you're at, Huygens, or Herschel at the north pole. Except that nothing *is* ever the same; all is nuance, the slow fortnightly progression of light and shade, the phases of the Sun's illumination of the big ball of gas . . . Well, these were scientists and military, most of them, what could one expect?

I loaded my tray with rather edible *Boeuf Bourguignon* from the dedicated cuisine printer, took it to a table where a handful of my new colleagues were chowing and jawing away, sat down at the spare place, set to after a genial glance around. At least with the queasy low gravity I wasn't worried that this spindly conventional chair would give way abruptly beneath me, tipping my considerable butt ungraciously to the floor. It had been known to happen back on Earth. Nobody laughed derisively if it did, at least there was that. Not any more, they didn't.

"Why, Sensei," said the Japanese biologist, Natasha Hsai, with the slightest edge in her tone, "won't you join us for dinner?" I do not give her title, nor do I mean any disrespect; all these eggheads had at least a couple of doctorates apiece, it went without saying.

"Why, Natasha, thank you, I believe I will." I started in on my second pearl onion. "Good fare, they don't stint you—nor should they, you are doing sterling work out here."

Several of the boffins shared glances, perhaps amused. They fancy themselves a cut above.

The handsome dark-haired fellow at the head of the table cleared his throat. "So, have you been outside yet to pay your respects to the Enigma, Mr. Park?"

From the dossiers I'd memorized before leaving Jupiter space, I recognized him, beneath his heavy straggled beard, as the head of molecular engineering, Antonio Caetani. "Just got back from the tour, Dr. Caetani. Fascinating. Right up my street."

"That's Tony," he said gracelessly. More glances flickered about the table. He chose to go right for it. Had to give him points for that. "Unless I'm mistaken, your street is paved with donations from the ID Institute."

I had encountered this kind of feral attitude previously, of course, especially from hardheaded scientists of conventional stamp. I could even share a kind of empathy for his rancor. It was as if, from his highly credentialed point of view, a government-sponsored raving crackpot were to be imposed on his team. As if a SETI astronomer in the Fermi Taskforce had been obliged to include a rectally-probed UFO abductee, or a global proteome program forced to sign up a fundamentalist creationist. I shrugged.

"Oh, give the guy a break, Tony," said the Iranian artifact expert, Mansour Khosrojerdi. "Let him eat his meal." His beard was darker and thicker even than Caetani's. Granted, the temperature was nearly minus two hundred degrees Celsius on the other side of the bubble, but this was self-mythologizing on a preposterous scale. Did they imagine they were rehearsing the doomed expeditions of the Arctic explorers? "We can postpone the ideological catfights until after the cheese and Amontillado."

"No need to spare my delicate sensibilities," I said with a hearty laugh, and reached for the carafe of red wine, luminous as a garnet under spurious golden Saturn light. The woman to my right, the string loop specialist Jendayi Shumba, got there first with her competent, chunky hand, dark as night.

"Allow me, Sensei Park."

"You are gracious, thanks. But let's all be friends, no need for formality, call me Myeong-hui." I grinned with big teeth at her dismay, then laughed out loud. "No, that's an impossible mouthful, it's all right, just call me Sam, love. Everyone does."

"Sam." A slightly uncomfortable silence fell. Scrapings of plastic flatware on realistic plates. I gobbled up my tasty beef, placed the empty plate back on my tray, slurped off some more of the stunningly convincing compiled Shiraz, took a bite of a lemon-ginger dessert to die for, decorated with pistachios. "Fermi-53, that's my considered opinion," I said with my mouth full. "My *tentative, preliminary* opinion, naturally."

"There are no recognizable roses or jonquils or violets or orchids, obviously. But the flowers scattered over the vehicle certainly do appear to be derived from Earth angiosperms, specialized to a range of climates and coevolutionary biomes," said Natasha Hsai. "So far as we can tell purely from visual inspection."

"Which rules out Fermi-53 instantly," Antonio Caetani said. "Blossoms of such complexity and beauty did not evolve on Earth until the Holocene. Probably not until humans deliberately bred the cultivars during the rise of agriculture."

"Oh, let's not oversimplify, Tony," Natasha said. "Pollinator insects and hummers and lizards and all the rest, they speciated along with the angiosperms; they *sculpted* each other without any help. Yes, I grant you, early humans broke up the soil to an unprecedented extent so they could grow their dinner, and then as a sideline retained and cultivated those blossoms that especially . . . well, made them happy. They're our botanical pets, now, because flowers make us smile and feel good. They induce positive emotions."

"They're scented sex organs," Caetani said, "doing their job."

I'd finished eating, for the moment. "The first flowering plants," I pointed out, "evolved sixty-five million years prior to the Chicxulub catastrophe. Nice symmetry, that." As far back in time before the extinction of the dinosaurs as we now stood after it. I didn't need to spell that out; these were, after all, highly trained intellects. But I

had to add the obvious, the intolerable, the all-but-unthinkable crux. "Humans, I remind you, were not the only cultivators." I found I had no appetite for cheese, and pushed back my chair. "Do you allow smoking here? Anyone for cigars and port?"

"No," said Caetani brusquely. "Sensei Park, we are scientists, not mystagogues. I confess myself bewildered by your presence at Huygens." Jendayi Shumba pulled at his sleeve; he shook her off. "I am frankly offended that the Imperium invited a quack from the Intelligent Dinosaur Institute here to Titan." Shumba kicked his leg under the table; I saw and felt the small causal shock of her intention and its manifestation, because that's who I am, that's what I do. "I have nothing more to say to you." He looked away disdainfully, drew his own dessert plate in front of him, scooped up a heaping spoonful of tiramisu and shoved it into his left eye, hard.

I raised one eyebrow, sighed, and rose, gathered my soiled crockery and plasticware on the tray, and walked away from the table. He probably wouldn't lose the sight in his eye. But what could I do?

Speaking technically, I'm an etiological distortion. Less pompously, there's something buried deep inside me that screws with cause and effect. I'm a footloose bubble of improbability. Call me a witch or a freak if you'd prefer, it rolls more easily off the tongue. Chances are good, though, that if you do call me nasty names, and I get to hear about it, you'll trip over the kid's bike in the dark, or run into an opening door, and break something painful. It's not that I harbor resentment at name-calling, but my unconscious seems to. As I say, not much I can do about that, sorry.

There were ructions and alarums but I brushed them off, went to bed and slept, as I had done every night for five years, like a damned soul. My gift or curse does not permit me to stand aside from that which wraps me like a shroud. Sorrow eddied in my dreams. My son—

—and as so often, these days, the booming, tolling voices came to me from a century and a half past, voices I have heard only in my head, reading their words on the pages of old books I found in an abandoned library, stinking with the reek of extinguished fires, where I had crept for silence like a heavy old dog with a wound too great to bear. The words were in English, that tongue almost as familiar to me as my own, picked up in the streets, later honed in special classes for promising children. I knew nothing of the writer, save that he was a man of substance in his place and time. His words raised a resonance in my burned soul. He must have known this same agony, and sought some bitter draught of comfort:

O Sorrow, cruel fellowship,  
O Priestess in the vaults of Death,  
O sweet and bitter in a breath,  
What whispers from thy lying lip?  
"The stars," she whispers, "blindly run;  
A web is wov'n across the sky;  
From out waste places comes a cry,  
And murmurs from the dying sun:  
"And all the phantom, Nature, stands—  
With all the music in her tone,  
A hollow echo of my own—  
A hollow form with empty hands."

And woke in the morning (by the conventional Earth clock calibrated to Seoul time, GMT+9 hours), as always alone, empty hollow form and all, despite the web wov'n palpably across the sky, and ravenously hungry, as usual.

So I ate a healthy breakfast and went to watch Meagle on closed circuit, a feed from the audiovisual record that military remote viewers are obliged to make for assessment, interpretation, and the archive. Today he sat zazen in a small cell like a non-denominational chapel, if chapels come with voice-activated holography displays (and maybe they do, I'm not a religious man), hands curled upward on his knees. His breathing was slow, regular. Maybe this was what their protocol called *cooling down*. His blind eyes were open, apparently fixed on the deep blue depths of the holly. Upon his head was a crown of thorns, a tidy maze of squid detectors pulsing to the quantum state of his brain, his brain stem, his meditative consciousness.

"Looking at the vehicle from above," he murmured. "Still can't find my way in. Yet." His lips quirked the smallest amount. Who Dares Wins, I thought. *Semper Fi*. Rah-rah. Well, it took a lot of quiet confidence in one's oddball abilities, no doubt. My own kind of disreputable ability just happened to me, or around me.

"Get back to the signal line," a gravelly voice said. Someone not in the room. His controller, I supposed. His operator, whatever they called the role.

"He's physically blind, I realize that," I told the medical officer seated beside me in the observation booth, "but doesn't knowing the identity of the target sort of pollute his, his guesswork?"

"The viewer does not guess."

"No offense. I mean, bias him unconsciously with preconceived notions?" Front-loading, they called it; I knew that much. "Like that stasis field thingee? Can we be sure that's not some scrap of nonsense from a comic strip he read when he was a child?"

"Mr. Meagle is well past all such neophyte hazards," the nurse said, offended by my uppity kvetching. He had gray hair at his close-cropped temples, and a steady gaze. Almost certainly a veteran of the war in—I shut that thought down, hard. "The colonel can afford to depart from the lock-step of traditional protocol. As he does when it suits him." I nodded, made soothing, conciliatory sounds. Perhaps mollified, he explained, "It contracts the search path polynomially."

"Um," I said, and settled back to view the sketched images form, dissolve, reform in the imaginary three-space of the holograms. As Meagle's fingers moved through the air, unseen lasers tracked the shapes he sketched. It seemed, watching him, that he actually *felt* his way around the starship out there in the frozen crust of Titan. Kineshetic imagery. A kind of heightened physicality, perhaps unavailable to a sighted person. Or was that nothing better than my whimsy, my fat man's sentimentality?

"Moving downward, gravity tugs at me," the remote viewer murmured. His voice was drowsy. I saw his shoulders spasm, as if he were falling forward and had caught himself.

"Wake up, there, colonel," the voice said, without reproach. "You're drifting."

"He's sliding into Phase Two. That was hypnic myoclonia," the nurse commented. "Jactitation."

"Haven't slept since yesterday," Meagle muttered. He shook himself. "Okay. Got it. I'm in."

The screens, trying to emulate whatever it was the psychic was "seeing/feeling," bloomed with a burst of visual noise. Were those things sketchy blocks of cells, like the hexagonal innards of a beehive? They shrank, jittered, smoothed into a kind of curvy passageway. The image was being enhanced by the computer's analysis, drawing on an archive of Meagle's private symbols.

"Analytical overlay," the operator said in a tone of admonition.

"I don't— No, this's what I'm actually perceiving. My God, Charley, the place is so fucking *old*. Millions of years. Tens of millions."

"Give me some Stage Three."

"Weirdly beautiful, man. But alien. Not insects, I'm pretty sure." The overlapping

images loped along, as if from a camera mounted on a cartoon's shoulder. Is this how the blind imagine seeing? Meagle had been sightless from birth, the dossier had informed me. But maybe that shouldn't be surprising; the blind repurpose the cortical and precortical tissues specialized by evolution for visual capture and registration—the large dedicated occipital lobe, the striate V1 cortex, all the way up the V hierarchy to middle temporal MT, pathways carrying neural trains from the retina to the brain, interpreting, pruning as they flashed their binary code. Yada yada. His sensitive, trained brain had nabbed that spare capacity, retained its function, modified its input channels. The Marvel That Is Your Brain! I overheard my own mocking subliminal commentary and wondered why I was so anxious, suddenly. A kind of curdling in the causal webs . . . I felt more and more uncomfortable, as if I badly needed to take a dump. Maybe I did. Meagle had fallen silent. Dropping off to sleep again? No, the constructed image was sliding past us in the hologram, slurring and breaking up in detail, but it was a corridor he walked along, in his spirit walk or whatever you call it.

Something sitting in a large padded chair. Christ!

"Christ!" Meagle cried, loudly. Small indicator lights went from placid green to blipping yellow on one display. A histogram surfed briefly into the red. The nurse was clicking keys, fast and unrattled.

"Bingo, Colonel," said the operator, triumph shaking his professional *sang-froid*.

My etiological sense scrambled. I lurched up, leaned forward, ready to puke. Meagle was doing the same, cable tangled at his neck, contacts pulling from his cropped scalp. In the great chair shown on the screen, as the imaginary viewpoint swung about, the interpretative computer sketched a seated person with a snout and deep-set hooded eyes, clawed hands gripping banked controls on the armrests.

The image skittered and jittered, revised itself as the causal whirlpool screeched around me. But no, this wasn't the dragon I was looking for. It was, it wasn't. The machine image spoke directly to me through Meagle and memory. That dead person, that ancient thing in its ancient warship, it was . . . was . . . impossible. Delusion and grief. Something else. I knew the beloved face beyond denial, of course, like a clumsy pencil drawing on the screen that tore my heart out. Human. Face burned down in places to the bone, gaze suffering, mouth mute, determined even in death. In his stained UN uniform, with Korean Imperium lieutenant flashes at the collar.

"Oh, lord god," I moaned, and did barf, then, like a puling schoolboy drunk.

From the corner of my leaking eyes, in the window feed from his RV cell, I saw Meagle turn convulsively. He seemed to stare right at me, through the camera, into the display, with his blue, blind eyes.

The main hologram image, too, looked steadfastly back at me—sketched from the Naval remote viewer's words and speaking hands, his brain rhythms, the archived set of his stereotypical ideograms—looked at me from a grave five years dug in the soil.

Song-Dam. My son. My poor boy. My lost hero child.

I started to cry, wiping at my bitter mouth, and couldn't stop.

Huygens is not part of the Imperium, of course, being a research agora, like Herschel, the other settlement on Titan, but it is a fiscal affiliate of Korea, as well as of Zimbabwe, the Brazilian Superstate, Camp Barsoom (on, you guessed it, Mars), and a handful of other polises on the Moon and Ganymede. So while the writ of Mr. Kim, my sponsor, did not run on Titan, precisely, his paternal hand was heavily in the weighing scales. The Warlord had developed a fondness for the Intelligent Dinosaur paradigm when he studied paleontology as a young student in Antarctica, where all the equivocal evidence was located prior to the Enigma's excavation, and he carried that interest through into maturity and, some said, senility. He would be pleased as punch.



Dr. Caetani, surprise, surprise, was not. Everyone by now had studied the remote viewing session, and more than once. My participation and role could be determined only by inference, since no recorders had been trained on the observation room. But the recording of Meagle's sessions showed plainly the results: the alien or saurian and, moments later, the harrowing superimposed image of my late son. For Caetani, I'm sure, my distress, my involvement, was just a piece of hammy theatrics, a shameful way to spray my mark onto an historic event.

"This afternoon, we know nothing more than we did a week ago," he stated bluntly. "I'm candidly dismayed at the gullibility of some of my colleagues here."

"The saurian—" began Jendayi Shumba. He cut her off instantly.

"—the *image* was no more veridical than the, the disturbed imposition into the colonel's entangled state of Sensei Park's tragic fixation on his son's death. Nobody doubts that Mr. Park is a functioning poltergeist, capable of casting images and interfering with complex electronic systems. It's why he's here—over my objections—and isn't the point." He took a deep breath, his features flushed behind that pretentious beard. "Our visitor's martyred son is certainly *not* aboard that Jurassic artifact, and surely nobody thinks he is. Neither, by the same token, is the dinosaur space captain that Mr. Park's well-prepped imagination also dreamed up and shoveled into the ideospace."

"With all due respect, you're out of your depth, Tony." This one I hadn't met before, an industrial psychiatrist named Lionel Berger. "Back off, will you? Remote viewing is no exact science, nor even an accomplished art—and I mean no disrespect to Colonel Meagle in pointing this out. We don't know how it works, except that quantum field nonlocality is engaged and implemented by an act of deliberation. Its famous vulnerability is that other minds can become trapped into the entanglement and add their own measures of information . . . but whether that aggregate data is veridical, symbolic, mythological or sheer phantasy, we can't tell just by simple inspection. Dismissing this evidence by flinging about words like 'psychic' and 'poltergeist' is argument by slur. I'm prepared to wait for more evidence before I decide so confidently what's inside that vessel."

Caetani, the surly fellow, actually said, "Bah!" I'd never heard anyone actually *say* that before. Others spoke, in their turn; Meagle sat at the back, his blind eyes closed, sunk into a sort of exhausted torpor. I'd have liked to go to him, sit beside him in respectful and sorrowing silence. Instead, as requested, I also remained silent, half-listening to the academese, the scholasticism, the stochasticism, the loop theories of cognitive restructuration.

I *had* seen my dead son.

I *had* seen the saurian sat in his great chair, or hers.

If cause is a pool of chaos and order blended by intention and brute event, I am (and nobody, as yet, has managed to explain why it is so) a small stick of dynamite exploding up random fishy critters to the shore. Brrrrr... That's a macabre, self-lacerating image. It had been my boy Song who perished in mindless explosions, and not by my hand. But hadn't I sent him into fatal danger? Into ultimate harm's way? Of course I had. Not by urging or forbidding, in so many words, but in my reckless skepticism, my louche lack of patriotism. Which had fetched us up where? Him, smashed like a detonated fish in a pool he could not escape, did not wish to escape. Me, bereft, alone, my bond to my nation long ago broken and betrayed. I grunted aloud, hoisted myself into a less uncomfortable position on a seat too small, as usual, for my girth.

"Sam? You wanted to say something?"

I looked around. They were gazing at me expectantly. "Oh, nothing. What can I donate that hasn't already been weighed and found wanting?" It was petty and self-re-

garding, and I snapped my mouth shut, but a fierce anger burst up in me anyway, so I opened it again. "I'll say one thing. And make no apologies for it. We are here," I swung one arm through an embracing arc, taking in the auditorium, the station, Titan, "because years ago, when I was still on Earth, I discerned a causal anomaly near this place. We are here because military and independent remote viewers on three worlds concurred in finding and describing the vehicle. We are here, therefore, driven by the many motives that arose from that discovery. But I insist that the principal occasion is Premier Kim's wish to test the hypotheses forwarded by the scientific entity I represent." I took a deep breath. "So far as I can see, what Colonel Meagle uncovered this morning corroborates precisely the predictions of the Intelligent Dinosaur Institute. If my presence has muddied your waters, I'm sorry—but again I remind you, if it were not for me, none of you would be here today.

"So lay the hell off, okay?"

I dug in my robe's pocket, found a Mars bar, unpeeled it, and gobbled it down.

Shortly after Song-Dam's eighth birthday—his mother long since escaped back into the whorehouse alleys she and I had both come from—I took him with me on a business trip to Palo Alto. I was the object of the business trip, my absurd gift, my poltergeist prowess with cause and effect. Several Stanford biophysics researchers had somehow picked up trash journalism stories about me as the luckiest/unluckiest man on Earth. Funding was limited, but I convinced them that Song was in my sole charge and that I wasn't budging without him.

So we took an exhausting flight from Incheon International across the Pacific and through the absurd indignities of US Homeland Security (despite a graduate student being on hand at the airport to collect us, now cooling his heels in the arrival lounge with a wilting cardboard sign in two languages; I had inadvertently set off various bells and whistles, so of course we were detained pointlessly, until one of the senior professors was persuaded to drive to the airport and vouch for us), and stayed in an anonymous, ugly block of apartments that seemed to have been compiled from polyurethane pretending to be marble. We could hear the dreary TV set next door through the adjoining wall.

I took Song for a long walk so he and I could get a feel for the alien place, this America, as we stretched our weary legs. Within three blocks (trust my causal eddies for once), we found a Korean food store, established that my parents' modest residence in Nangok—back at the turn of the century when it was still a squalid slum in a hilly area of Sillim-dong, Gwanak District—was just spitting distance from the proprietors' familial stomping grounds, and found ourselves dragged happily to a nearby park by Mr. Kwon's wife and three kids to fly dragon kites in the cool afternoon breeze.

I helped Song pay out the string. Our borrowed kite was a scarlet and gold Dragon Diamond (a gift to us both, as it turned out—and thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Kwon!). Our dragon quivered on the middle air a moment, strained against his leash, then suddenly flung himself upward into the deepening blue Californian sky. The line went taut. Song let it go in fright, but I held tight, and a moment later he put his hands back to the winch reel beside mine. I saw the line stretched between my hand, his small resolute hands, and the high, swooping, flower-bright dragon: a luminous string.

"Daddy, look!" said my son, wild with excitement. "Our dragon is flying on a beam of photons!"

At that moment, as if Buddha had smacked me in the ear, I was enlightened.

"I think I can get in," I told the Director of Operations, a tight-jawed fellow named Namgoong, almost certainly a political appointee but in secure possession of a decent scientific reputation with degrees in geology and astrobiology. Earth and sky, I

thought, but hid my smile. "I think I can break the shield. The question is, do I dare?"

"Yes. Precisely. If you rupture the stationary shield, who knows what might seep out into the atmosphere." He gave me a thin-lipped smile. "Fortunately, Sensei, we shall not have to wait three years for an Environmental Impact Study. The Imperium wants this thing opened. Now. It's why you're here."

"To tell you the truth, sir, I'm more worried about what might seep *in*. They must have sealed it against Titan's atmosphere for good reason."

"A motive that expired millions of years ago." He rose. "I'm having a containment dome erected around the locus. There's no way we can establish blockade underneath the ice as well, but this will meet most likely challenges. Or so I'm assured."

"I'm relieved to hear it." I belatedly heaved up my bulk. "When will you want me out there?"

"You'll be advised. We have a full scale colloquium scheduled, starting at two. I'll expect you to be there, Sensei Park, and on your best behavior. No more outbursts, if you please."

"More damned chin-wagging. Science used to be an empirical exercise," I grumbled.

"Led by theory, as I'm sure you understand." He was standing at his door, and I went out, biting my lip. Nobody had the faintest starting point for a theory to explain my causal distortions, and not much to account for the photon-entangled portage functor. I could do it, I could show them a method for using it (and had), but I didn't have a theory-empowered clue how or why. I'm nobody's mutant superman, that much I do know. (Or is that just a fat man's self-doubt speaking?)

Postmodern science, as far as I can tell looking in from the outside, is drunk on the sound of its own voice. But yes, I know: look who's complaining. I recalled again that Victorian sage, that poet Tennyson. He had it right: *I sometimes hold it half a sin to put in words the grief I feel; for words, like Nature, half reveal and half conceal the Soul within. But, for the unquiet heart and brain, a use in measured language lies; the sad mechanic exercise, like dull narcotics, numbing pain.* I followed Dr. Nam-goo along the narrow compiled corridors of Huygens station, so like those awful domiciles on the outskirts of Palo Alto, and went to hear the sad mechanics exercise their tongues and dull their pain, and maybe mine.

The circulated air was pungent, despite the scrubbers, with the musk of excited animals crowded together. A schematic chart I'd grown familiar with, these last few months, started displaying on the auditorium wall, replacing the magnified image of Saturn's glorious tilted hat. The Fermi Paradox Solution candidates. My eye bounced off them, falling down a cliff of words and logic with no footing in reality beyond the dragon-haunted thing outside the dome:

**Where are They?**

**Fermi 1. They are here among us, and call themselves Koreans.**

That always got a satisfied titter, except from any Hungarians in the crowd.

**Fermi 2. They are here, running things.**

A chance for the Hungarians, and anyone else chafing under the Imperium, to get their own back with a belly laugh. No giggles here, though, I noticed.

**Fermi 3. They came and left.**

Bingo, I thought. They came and left flowers scattered in their wake. Strictly, though, that was Fermi 53, the only choice left. The ancient intelligent dinosaur hypothesis.

**Fermi 6. We are interdicted.**

**Fermi 10. They are still on their way here.**

The starship had blown that one, and others like it, clear out of the water. Time to trim the list, methinks.

**Fermi 21. They're listening, only fools are transmitting.**

**Fermi 22. Dedicated killer machines destroy everything that moves, anywhere in space.**

**Fermi 28. The Vingean Singularity takes them . . . elsewhere.**

No Singularity back near the end of the Cretaceous, I thought. Judging by the remote viewer's sketches, that saurian pilot was advanced, but not sufficiently advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic.

**Fermi 38. Earth is the optimal place for life, just by chance.**

Could be. And for intelligent life, at that. Hey, look, we've seen it twice: the smart dinosaurs and Homo sap.

**Fermi 48. Language is vanishingly rare.**

Ha! Yeah, right. Blah blah blah. Still, maybe so. The skies are awfully silent, which is where we came in...

**Fermi 49. Science is a rare accident.**

Not as rare as I am, I thought, touching the etiological chains and vortices all around—and no scientist ever predicted me. Most of them still didn't even *know* about me, thanks to all those Above Top Secret restrictions. Damn it.

Namgoong cleared his throat at the podium. Voices, in clumps and then one by one, fell silent. Hey, maybe that's it. God tapped His microphone, and the cosmos shut up to listen. And they're still listening, bent and cowed by the awfulness of what they heard. But not us, we haven't heard from God yet, despite a thousand revelations claimed and proclaimed. Or if we have, there's no way to search through the babbling noise and extract the divine signal. Funny way to run a universe.

I could feel the dinosaur calling to me, even so, through the appalling cold of Titan's snows and the void of fifty or a hundred million years. And the entwined memory of my son, sacrificed for nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

"Those are the classic guesses—most of them wrong." The Director flicked his finger; the display went to blank gray. "We still have no idea why the galaxy, indeed the universe as a whole, is quiet. Why the stars are still shining, spilling out their colossal energy resources, when intelligence should be collecting it. Calculations you're all familiar with prove that a single intelligent species arising anywhere in the galaxy within the last billion years would by now have colonized all its trillion stars and associated bodies, turned the sky black with Matrioshka shells—or perhaps obliterated the stars in vast, wasteful wars."

I pricked up my ears. A political subtext? Perhaps not; maybe our director was just a tone-deaf drone. I glanced around; several people near me had dropped their eyes, more than one held fists clenched tight. Okay.

"One of the equally classic Great Filters must screen out potential intelligent life and leave the heavens exactly as they'd have to be if there is no life at all out there. No *intelligent*, *starfaring* life, anyway.

"So now we're faced with a new paradox. Fermi remains unanswered—and yet we have this old vehicle made by beings not of our own species, but apparently related. The likelihood of that coincidence being due to chance alone is impossibly small. I see only three remaining possibilities."

"Barney did it," someone called, muted but clear across the room. A wave of tittering. I felt my jaw tighten, and a flush creep into my cheeks.

"A previous civilization sprung from dinosaur stock on Cretaceous Earth, or even earlier, yes," said Dr. Namgoog evenly. "The opinion represented here today by our guest, Sensei Park."

A pattering of polite applause, some even more muted groans.

"We have evidence in the form of preliminary scans by our Naval remote viewer, Colonel Meagle, that the creature . . . the being, forgive me . . . in charge of the craft has just such an origin. Leaving aside the improbability of parallel evolution. If so,

this leaves the earlier and larger Fermi question unanswered: where are its kindred now, why haven't they conquered the whole galaxy? Tipler and others proved decades ago that this could have been achieved at achievable sub-light speeds within a million years. If they have, why don't we see them?"

Hearing it stated so flatly, I was dizzied, as always, by the prospect. Flotillas of starcraft fleeing into the spiral arms at a tenth of light speed, crammed with dragon seed or our own. Or minute nanoscale pods fired toward a hundred million stars by magnetic catapult, or driven on filmy wings by laser light. Yet these, too, were last year's dreams, last century's. We had stepped from Earth to Ganymede to Titan entangled on a light beam, and without waiting to be shoved here by sailboat. The moment entangled luminal portage became a reality for my own species, it opened the yawning cavern: why not for them, as well? What the hell was a *starship* doing here? Why bother? It was so last week, like finding a steam locomotive under the ice.

Namgoog was enunciating his other solutions to Fermi, but I didn't care. I was entranced by the mystery of the sleeping creature, sedate under his bedding of live flowers. It was a hunger like my endless appetite for chow. I wanted to step straight through the damned shell of the ship and look the critter in the eye, man to man. Even if it decided to eat *me*.

That's what dragons do, isn't it?

And so to bed. Where I lay in the dark in a lather of fright for fifteen minutes. Fearful and weak. Bleak. Needing a leak. I climbed out and thudded to the sanitary personal. When I got back, after a swab up and down and across with a wet face cloth to dab away the worse of the flossweat, my door was slightly open. Through it came the never-stopping background clanging and banging of humans and machines keeping the place ticking over. Snapping my fingers, I clicked the room light up to dim. Dr. Jendayi Shumba, chubby string looper, stretched at ease on my bed, clad in sensible pajamas with a mission blaze on the collar. Of course, I jumped and squealed.

"What the— Is there some—"

"Hush up, dear man, and come over here." She grinned.

"You're not serious. Are you?"

In evidence, she slithered out of her pjs and raised her eyebrows.

"Absurd. I'd crush you like a bug."

"Myeong-hui, you don't weigh any more, here, than my little boy."

"You have a—?" I swallowed, and crept closer. "I had a son once."

"Let us be in this moment, Sensei," she said without reproach.

"I'm disgusting to look upon," I said frankly. "And I don't need a pity—"

She had her fingers across my mouth, and then pulled me down through several clunky jumpy evolutions. "There are other ways to convey one's . . . intimacy," she said.

"Ulp," I protested.

"An easy mouth is a great thing on a long journey, is it not, old fellow?" she said, releasing mine and patting my neck.

"Ex-cuse me?"

Jendayi burst out laughing, a slightly husky, wonderfully exciting sound. "A quote from an old British classic about a horse. Nineteenth century, I believe. You might have read it as a child. *Black Beauty*."

"You are the black beauty," I said, noticing a cue when it smacked me between the eyes. I raised my voice and said, "Door close," and it did.

"You've got a way to break into the ship, don't you?" she said, after a time without time.

I was reeling and reckless. "Yes. Probably."

"So you really are a poltergeist." She stroked my contemptible belly, as if it were a

friendly animal sharing the bed with us. "Tony nearly poked his damn eye out." Her laugh was throaty, dirty, a tonic.

"Don't blame me," I said, and found a glass of water, drained it. "It's like being able to wiggle your ears."

In the near-dark, she wiggled hers, and more.

But before she left, Jendayi said, "Bring me back a sample. A skin scraping, anything with DNA. Just for me, honey, okay?" Oh, so that's why you're here? Had to be some reason. Exploitative bitch. But that's life, right?

Looking like a well-laid but annoyed and put-upon squat polar bear in my body-glove, some hellish number of minus degrees on the far side of its skin, I stood gazing down from the edge of the excavation. The spacecraft was unaltered, every bloom precisely where it had been several days before, where it had been, perhaps, several tens of millions of years before. Unless it was salted here recently as a snare for gullible humans. In which case, it might be younger than I. Not so likely, though.

"Ready when you are, Sensei," said the political officer, doing Mr. Kim's bidding, and damn the scientists' caution.

I raised one thumb and let myself drift. Cause and effect unbraided, started their long, looping dance of etiological distortion, swirling, curdling. I was the still center of the spinning world. Certainties creaked, cracked. A favorite poem entered my heart, by Ji-Hoon Cho, "Flower petals on the sleeves":

The wanderer's long sleeves  
Are wet from flower petals.  
Twilight over a riverside village  
Where wine is mellow.

Had this saurian person below me, trapped now in timelessness, known wine? Crushed release and perhaps moments of joy from some archaic fruit not yet grape? I thought, with a wrenching mournfulness:

When this night is over  
Flowers will fall in that village.

"Hey!"

And there went the flowers, drawn up and tossed away from the hull of the starship. They were scattering in the methane wind, lifted and flung by the bitter gusts, floral loveliness snap-frozen, blown upward and falling down in drifts into the alien snow.

"The stationary shield is discontinued," said a clipped voice in my ears.

I stepped forward, ready to enter the ancient, imprisoned place. To meet my dinosaur, who had either died or even now lived, freed from timeless suspension. A hand caught my encased arm.

"Not yet, Sam. We have a team prepped. Thanks, you've done good here today." I turned, hardly able to see through my tears, and it was not that bastard Tony Caetani groveling his apologies, the universe could not be so chirpy as that. I hadn't met this one before, although he'd picked up my dining room nickname and used it with a certain familiar breeziness; some beefy functionary of some armed service division, grinning at me in his bluff farmboy way. I nodded, and watched the team of marines go down, and remembered my dear boy and the way he had gone forward fearlessly into darkness and then into the fire falling from the sky. It did not matter one whit that I thought his cause wrong-headed. I remembered a poem in that book I'd found in the ruined library, a poem by an Englishman named Kipling that had torn my



heart as I sat before Song-Dam's closed coffin. There was no comfort this tide, the poem warned me, nor in any tide, save this:

he did not shame his kind—  
Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.

Without shame, I sobbed, but then drew myself up and turned back to Huygens agora. Perhaps, I told myself, ten or sixty million years ago, another father had laid his son on these cruel snows and bade him farewell. I murmured to that reptilian father, offering what poor borrowed comfort I might to us both, across all that void of space and time: "Then hold your head up all the more, This tide, And every tide; Because he was the son you bore, And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!"

I looked straight up above me, at the photodiode display before my eyes in the viewmask, swallowing hard, to follow the streaming tide of blossoms on the wind, and there was Saturn, old Father Time, hanging in the orange smoke of the sky, an arrow through his heart. I gave him a respectful nod, and raised one gloved thumb in salute. O

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# NEXT ISSUE

## JUNE ISSUE

Next month we celebrate an auspicious anniversary—that of the twenty-fifth anniversary of **James Patrick Kelly's** famed June stories. Not only have these June stories offered some of Kelly's most honored works over the years—the Hugo winning "Think Like a Dinosaur" and "10<sup>16</sup> to 1" and the Nebula nominated "Undone," "Itsy Bitsy Spider," and "Men Are Trouble" are some notable examples—they've also proven to be some of the most popular stories in our annual Readers' Award polling. You like him, you really like him, and we are glad to not only bring you both his twenty-sixth consecutive June story, but also a written celebration of his talent and vivacious presence in *Asimov's*.

We begin the celebration with a special Thought Experiments column featuring several notable contributors, including perennial favorite **Connie Willis**, who will wax poetic about Kelly's lauded career in SF. We then present his newest June story, "Going Deep." In Jim's own words: "a teenager in training to join the crew of a starship begins to question whether the sacrifices she will have to make are worth the thrill of scouting new worlds. But can she turn her back on space and the expectations of her Moon community, her family, schoolmates, and boyfriend?"

## ALSO IN JUNE

That's certainly not all! **Chris Willrich** returns to our pages with his exciting, sweeping space opera, "Sails the Morne"; **Tom Purdom** presents an unsettling tale of future morality in "Controlled Experiment"; UK novelist **Eric Brown**, making a fine *Asimov's* debut, spins a tale of a love that cannot be, amidst harsh "Cold Testing"; **Sandra McDonald**, makes her *Asimov's* debut, the chilling fable of "The Monsters of Morgan Island"; and **John Alfred Taylor**, after too long an absence, warns of the "Bare, Forked Animal" and his unfortunate dependence on futuristic technology.

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg**, in his Reflections column, examines an unusual African fantasy work from "In the Bush of Ghosts"; **James Patrick Kelly** referees yet another generational conflict within the SF field in his On the Net column, "Mind the Gap"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on April 7, 2009. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in classy and elegant paper format or new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

## COMING SOON

brand new stories by **Stephen Baxter**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **R. Garcia y Robertson**, **Robert Reed**, **William Barton**, **Bruce McAllister**, **Elissa Malcohn**, **Steven Popkes**, **Sara Genge**, **Michael Blumlein**, **Christopher Barzak**, **Michael Cassutt**, **Jerry Oltion**, **Damien Broderick**, and many others!

# EXEGESIS

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress just completed teaching a semester at the University of Leipzig. She says that nearly all of her German students confessed to not reading much SF before the course began—but they do now. Her most recent book is *Steal Across the Sky* (Tor, February, 2009), which involves aliens, space flight, atonement for mega-crimes, and the nature of what we think we know about reality. The following story, however, is in an entirely different vein: a light-hearted look at what we think we know about language.

1950

from *Branson's Quotations for Book Lovers*  
ed. Roger Branson, Random House

**“F**rankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.” One of the world's most famous quotations, this is the film version of Rhett Butler's (Clark Gable) immortal farewell to Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) in Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone With the Wind*, a crowning achievement of American literature. It occurs at the end of the film when Scarlett asks Rhett, “Where shall I go? What shall I do?” if he leaves her. The print version does not include the word “frankly,” which was added by director David O. Selznik. The line was bitterly objected to by the Hays Office, but remained in the 1939 film, due to a last-minute amendment to the Production Code.

2050

from *Critical Interpretations of Twentieth Century Literature*,  
Random House,  
eds. Jared Morvais and Hannah Brown

TEXT: “Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Line from a twentieth-century American novel, *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, now largely dismissed as both racist and romanticized. The male protagonist, Rhett Butler, speaks the line to the abrasive heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, as he leaves their marriage.

2150

*Dictionary of Modern Sayings for the Faithful*  
Church of Renewed Enlightenment

ENTRY: “Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.”

Line from a twentieth-century novel written by Margaret Mitchell in Southern Ezra (a section of the former United States of America), in which a man, Rhett Butler, abandons his legal wife, an adulteress (“scarlet woman”). The passage is a stark illustration of the sinfulness and irresponsibility of pre-Ezran so-called “Christianity.” Praise!

2250

from *Studees in Lawst Litrucher*, Reformd Langwij Co-ullishun, Han Goldman  
SUBJECT: "Franklee, my der, I dont giv a dam."

Line from Pre-Kolapse novul—awther unown—that twoday iz mostlee fowk sayeen in Suthern Ezra. The prahverb means—ruffly—that the speeker wil not giv even wun "dam"—wich may hav bin a tipe of lokul mune—to by a "der," an xtinkt meet animul. Implikashun is that watever iz beein diskused is over prised. This interpretashun is reinforced by the tradishunul usoceashun of the line with peepul hoo served meels, nown as "butlers."

2350

Harox College Download 6753-J-ENLIT

TEXT: "Frankly<sup>1</sup>, my dear<sup>2</sup>, I don't give a damn<sup>3</sup>."

New research sheds interesting light on this folk saying from Mubela (formerly Southern Ezra). The Pre-Collapse Antiquarian Grove humbly makes this offering to the Forest of Enlightened Endolas:

<sup>1</sup> "Frankly" means that the speaker is talking without subterfuge or lies. Since only liars emphasize their truthfulness—enlightened endolas, of course, represent truth with their very beings—the speaker is openly announcing that he is lying, signaling to the hearer that everything which follows is therefore untrue. In fact, the speaker *does* give a damn. This sort of convoluted speech was often necessary in pre-Collapse societies, in which "governments" were so politically oppressive that truth could not be openly spoken.

<sup>2</sup> "My dear" is an honorific, similar in construction to the equally archaic, hierarchical "my lord" or "your excellency." This suggests that in the original, the speaker was addressing some sort of lord or commander.

<sup>3</sup> "Damn." Rigorous scholarship by Kral BlackG3 reveals that this was a curse. Its presence in a coded message to a high official is intriguing. For centuries the folk saying has been associated with an extinct "servant class" that included ditch diggers, butlers, and dentists. It may be that in ancient times, when humans compelled other humans rather than robots to provide services, a folk saying was the only acceptable way to "curse" or condemn the owner class, even as the speaker obediently transmits whatever coded information followed. Unfortunately, the sentences following "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" in this political drama have been lost.

NOTE: The common variation, still occasionally seen even in scholarly forums, is scripted in the short-lived and silly "Reformed English": "Franklee, my der, I dont giv a dam."

2450

Fragment of a Download Recovered After the EMP  
Catastrophe of 2396, with Exegesis

"Frank Lee, my dear, I don't give a dam." "Frank Lee"<sup>1</sup> means that the speaker is talking without subterfuge or lies. Since only liars emphasize their truthfulness—enlightened endolas<sup>2</sup>, of course, represent truth with their very beings—the speaker is openly announcing that he is lying, signaling to the hearer that everything which follows is therefore untrue. In fact, the speaker *does* give a damn.<sup>3</sup> This sort of convoluted speech was often necessary in pre-Collapse<sup>4</sup> societies, in which "governments"<sup>5</sup> were so politically oppressive that truth could not be openly spoken.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frank Lee—Unknown folk persona who seems to have represented "straight shooting," either verbal or (as is to be expected in violent historical periods) the use of personal arms. See *Frank and Jesse James*.

<sup>2</sup> endolas—religious scholars of the pre-Catastrophe EuroPolar Coalition. They conflated some solid learning with much mysticism. Organized into “groves,” “forests,” and “amazons,” in the eco-heavy nomenclature of that era.

<sup>3</sup> This explanation is typical of the confused and ignorant thinking that prevailed in the Endola Age.

<sup>4</sup> Collapse—one name given to the economic and social upheavals, circa 2190-2210. Exact dates have, of course, disappeared with much other history in the EMP Catastrophe. Other names: Crash, Cave-in, the Big Oops (etymology unknown).

<sup>5</sup> governments—vernacular name for ruling bodies, some consensual and some not. All pre-date Electronic Fair Facilitation and Enforcement.

<sup>6</sup> “so politically oppressive that truth could not be openly spoken” Unable to say whether this analysis is or is not correct.

2850, i

Unified Link Information, Quantum-Entangled Energy Center  
DB 549867207 (Historical)

DATUM: “Franklee, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

VARIATIONS: “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a dam.”

“Franklee, my der, I dont giv a dam.”

CLASSIFICATION: Proverb, class 32

DATE: Pre-QUENTIAM, probably pre-twenty-second century, specifics unknown

ORIGIN: Human, Sol 3, specifics unknown

LANGUAGES: Many (recite list?). Original probably Late English

EXPLICATION: “Franklee” (or “Frankly”) indicates origin in era pre-telepathic-implants, with choice of offering true or untrue information. “My dear” is an archaic term of endearment for members of a “family”; indicates pre-gene-donate society. “Don’t give a damn” is antique idiom meaning the speaker/projector is not involved in a current project. Equivalents: “apathy,” “independence,” “non-functioning implant.”

LAST REQUEST FOR THIS INFORMATION: No requests to date

2850, ii

*\*Ser, don’t screen your implant from me!\**

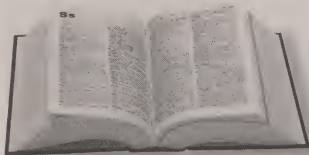
*\*I go now.\**

*\*Why? Why leave me? Why leave the pod? We desire you!\**

*\*I go now.\**

*\*But why?\**

*\*I tell you, pod mate, I no longer care.\* ○*



Kristine Kathryn Rusch's latest Retrieval Artist novel, *Duplicate Effort*, came out in February. Her previous book in that venue was nominated for Best Science Fiction Novel by the *Romantic Times*. The author's Hugo-nominated and Readers Award winning story, "Recovering Apollo 8" (February 2007), which took place throughout our solar system, has just been reprinted in Russian, and is garnering her mail worldwide. Her newest novella takes us much further afield and gives us the chance to explore the beauty and the mystery of . . .

# THE SPIRES OF OENON

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

## 1

Meklos Verr took over once the command ship entered Amnthra's atmosphere. He was a better on-planet pilot than anyone else on board. Besides, he preferred to do most things himself. Even though he had the coordinates, Meklos flew hands-on. He opened the portals so that the cockpit, which jutted out in front of the small ship, seemed as though it was encased in sky. He didn't have quite a three-hundred-and-sixty degree view, but it was close. Only the area directly behind him, where a door led to the space the crew usually called the bunkhouse, blocked the view.

It had taken two days to get to Amnthra from base, and that was about twelve hours longer than any group should have been in this vessel. But no other space-to-ground vessel had been available on short notice, so he had to take this one.

This part of Amnthra was isolated and sparsely populated. According to rumor, the ancients still lived in these mountains. However, no matter how hard he looked, he couldn't find any independent confirmation of those rumors. The Naramzin Mountain Range had some of the tallest peaks in this sector. It ran from east to west along Amnthra's largest continent. In fact, except for the beaches along the edge of the continent, the range and its small hidden valleys were Amnthra's largest continent.

Most of Amnthra's people now lived on islands and the four smaller continents, which were mostly flat. The weather was good in those places, the soil rich, and life spectacular. Or so the travelogues told him.

They also told him to avoid the Naramzins. Hostile terrain of surprising beauty, the travelogues said. Easy to get lost in. Easy to die in.

Meklos had no intention of dying or getting lost. He was heading to the largest valley on the continent—the Valley of Conquerors—where he and his team would camp before they hiked to the Spires of Denon—and the city beneath them.



The Spires of Denon were the reason he had to leave the ship so far away. They were delicate, so delicate that scientists believed the wrong harmonic vibration would shatter them, and one of the great treasures of the Lost Age would disappear forever. He could see the Spires in the distance, rising like Earthmade skyscrapers into the clear blue sky. Right now, he didn't care about the Spires. Right now, he worried about landing, hiking, and working under such restrictive conditions.

He had agreed to those conditions—had, in truth, hired on for them. But he didn't like them. And he liked them less as the peaks of the Naramzin Range came into view. The Naramzin was unconquerable—that was what the ancient texts said, which was why the Denonites had, for a time, conquered every known civilization on Amnthra.

It wasn't until Amnthra got rediscovered by the other peoples in the sector that the Denonites actually got defeated. And then they disappeared. One of the great mysteries of the Lost Age. And one he wasn't about to solve.

He was just here to provide security—not that he could find any real reason for it. He had done some research, in the limited time he'd had before taking this job, and it looked like no one and nothing threatened the group of archeologists who worked the ancient city of Denon.

His people needed a rest. They'd gone on a rescue mission two months before and found themselves in the middle of a civil war. Two weeks and four deaths later, they'd managed to rescue some university professors who had wandered into the wrong encampment.

He'd given the bulk of his team a vacation. Fifteen remained—the fifteen who, like him, didn't believe in time off. So he'd force them to take it with this easy job in one of the great sites of the Lost Age. He had a hunch he might even enjoy this job himself.

## 2

**G**abrielle Reese stood hip-deep in the chalk-covered water. The water was cold against her waders. Her hands were growing numb, which was the worst thing for this work. Even the tip of her nose was cold.

She stood on an unstable pile of rocks, which partially blocked the center arch in the underground caverns. She had wedged herself against the wall and what might have been a stone protecting a small cubby.

She could see the statue in the glare of her headlamp. The statue was small, black, and definitely not Denonite. If she had to guess, she would wager that the statue had come from one of the lost tribes, the ones that the Denonites had conquered early in their reign on Amnthra.

"Gabrielle," said Yusef Kimber, one of the best archeologists on her crew, "you have to get out of there. You're fifteen minutes past time."

Fifteen minutes past time. A time she had established, based on her own research. She hadn't allowed the medical doctor down here to do his own estimates. So far, only she and Yusef knew the caverns existed. She didn't trust the rest of her team. If she told anyone else, they'd tell the graduate students, the post-docs, and the hangers-on who were digging out the ancient city.

Once those people knew, this place would be overrun with thieves, thrill seekers, and treasure hunters, not to mention journalists and art historians, who would want to see all this evidence of wars in the Lost Age.

"Gabrielle," Yusef said.

"All right," she said, letting the exasperation into her voice.

She reached into the niche and carefully grabbed the statue. It felt like it was

made of ice, even though she knew it wasn't. Her breath caught. It was lovely—and she was right. It wasn't Denonite. It came from a completely different culture, one she hadn't seen outside of historical texts.

She waved her other hand at Yusef so that he could come down and take the statue. They hadn't found as much in the niches as she'd expected. Not all the niches were full. But enough of them were that she was convinced an entire treasure trove had once existed here.

The water posed the greatest problem. She knew they weren't very deep in the caverns. The flooding had probably taken artifacts and moved them out of their protective holes. She could only hope that it hadn't ruined them as well.

Yusef wrapped the statue in protective covering and put it into his pack. They'd been storing everything in a hidden part of the building that covered the entrance to the caverns.

Soon she would have to move the items. She was preparing a nearby temple so that she could clean and identify them. Mostly, she planned to work alone. But if she did bring in some of the other members of her team, she would tell them the items had come from the ground or the buildings inside the city, not from the caverns.

She placed her hands on the flat rock just above the waterline and pulled herself up, the way that she used to pull herself out of the full-grav pool on her father's starbase. She scraped her right wader against the stone, leaving a dank chalky mark. She wasn't sure if that mark would be permanent or not. Damage was easy in these caverns—hell, it was easy everywhere in the ancient city, which had been untouched until her team had uncovered it five years before.

It had taken a lot of work, but she'd managed to keep the city quiet for two years. Finally, she'd needed more help, so she advertised on college boards all over the sector. She got dozens of graduate students, and a handful of post-docs. The post-docs were still here, but the graduate students cycled in and out like the itinerant students they were, bringing the news of the ancient city of Denon into the mainstream community. Fortunately, she had published her early research before the ad. She would have to do the same thing with the caverns. But not until she explored them all and learned what other treasures were here.

She pulled her other knee up, making a second mark, then placed her hand on the side of the arch. This time, she didn't leave a mark. But the stone was cold, even through her glove. She was going to have to sit in the sun for a long time to get this chill out of her system. Still, she wasn't quite ready to leave. Before she walked to the old path that led to the steps, she peered through the arch.

She had hoped to get inside that next cavern before her time elapsed, and she hadn't made it. But she had learned something. The floor slanted upward, so the next series of caverns—if, indeed, there was a series—would not yet be underwater.

The light from her miner's helmet shone inside, reflecting off the natural white walls. She didn't see inky blackness below, which was how the water manifested itself in the darkness—even when the water had taken on the sludge from the walls. A pristine cavern—maybe the last pristine cavern—before the underwater work began.

The air was drier here than Meklos expected, and the sunlight brighter. He'd never seen sunlight this bright. When he'd asked Chavo Grennoble, the young man the archeologists had sent to lead the team up the correct path, Chavo had said that the brightness was a change in perception, which came because Meklos had so recently been on a ship. Meklos had been on many ships before landing planetside, and he'd

never experienced light like this before. But he said nothing, even though his own second in command, Phineas Aussiere, gave him an odd look.

Meklos had been on jobs filled with academics before. They always condescended to him, assuming he was stupid because he preferred a physical job to sitting in some classroom letting someone else tell him what to think.

He adjusted his pack along his shoulders. In it, he had an automatic tent, rations for the next month, and more equipment than he probably needed. He hadn't been able to assess the job from the starbase, so he had brought collapsible bots, motion detectors, sound detectors, and a variety of cameras. He also had sixteen self-assembling laser rifles, several Grow-it grenades, and one giant sky-cannon.

Even though everything was in its inert or collapsed state, he was still carrying thirty-five kilos on his back. He carried the greatest weight because he had the sky-cannon, but his team's packs weren't much lighter.

The kid, Chavo, was scrambling up the path like a mountain goat, and the entire team was keeping up with him. Meklos knew for a fact that the kid wouldn't have been able to walk this path with thirty-five kilos on his back.

Meklos thought of asking the kid how they'd gotten their equipment over this peak, then realized that the kid wouldn't know. From what little Meklos had learned before agreeing to the job, the project had started ten years before with an examination of the Spires of Denon, and then turned into an excavation of the entire ancient city nestled in the center of the mountain itself.

As they got closer to the peak, the air grew warmer. Meklos had thought it would be colder. On inhabited worlds, most mountains, particularly those this tall, had a snow pack at the top. In fact, he had thought this mountain—called Denon's Secret—had a snow pack. From the valley where they'd left the ship, he had noted the reddish-brown dirt slowly turning white near the Spires. He had naturally assumed snow. But no snow could survive in this heat. If he had known it was going to be this warm, he would have worn some environmental gear.

The ground beside him was turning white, which was how he knew they were nearing the top. From this angle, it was nearly impossible to look at the Spires. They loomed above him, large and imposing. Their shadows crisscrossed the path, like the shadows of branches in a forest, but these shadows were huge. He would step out of a shadow into the sunlight, and walk for several meters before stepping into another one.

The Spires weaved and bent into each other, adding at least four kilometers to the top of the mountain. As he neared the peak, he couldn't tell if this mountain was old and rounded with time or if—in some distant past—the mountaintop had blown off.

If it had blown off, then he was climbing a volcano, which unnerved him slightly. He'd worked two separate jobs near active volcanoes and their rumblings had kept him awake at night. But nothing in his research claimed Denon's Secret was an active volcano. If it had been, the Spires would not have survived. The groundquakes would have shattered them.

The team had nearly reached the Spires when Chavo stopped. He extended his spindly arms as if he were some religious figure leading his followers to the promised land. "Before we go farther," he said, "I need to tell you the rules of the Spires. I'm sure that Gabrielle or someone else below will reiterate, but since we're going to go right past them, I figured I'd better say something."

"Could've said it at the base," someone muttered behind Meklos.

"He thinks we're too dumb to remember for that long," someone else answered, echoing Meklos's thoughts.

Chavo didn't seem to hear, or, if he did, the comments didn't embarrass him—probably because he believed them to be true. He glanced behind him, then swept his hand toward the upper part of the mountain.

"The Spires are man-made," Chavo said. "They're handcarved. They've been treated with something—we don't know what—that has allowed them to remain in place for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. In addition to being bent and formed by hand, the Spires are also etched."

Meklos didn't know that. He raised his head a little, and saw the edges of the Spires coming out of the white dirt. He couldn't imagine that sort of painstaking work. He wasn't even sure how the creators had made it. Did they begin at the top and add pieces as they went along, until they had the full-sized Spires? Then did they take them from whatever workshop they'd used and attach them to the mountainside?

The technology needed to do this seemed beyond the ancients. But the ancients had built and forgotten more technology than he would ever know. After all, geneticists had proved that this sector had been colonized by people from Earth, just like the stories said. The DNA matches were complete. Which meant that everyone in the sector had common ancestors, at least once upon a time. That time was so long ago that civilizations rose and fell, knowledge was lost, knowledge was gained, and wars were fought, then forgotten. Just like the history of colonization had been forgotten.

"So," Chavo said, "because they're unusually delicate, don't touch the Spires. We're afraid that the oils from your fingertips could harm the coating."

"Why?" someone muttered. "Because of where we've been?"

"They don't know where we've been," someone else said. "That's what they're afraid of."

"Actually," Chavo said loudly—since he'd clearly heard that, "none of us are allowed to touch. We've seen them forever and examined them for ten years, and we still can't touch. We can't figure out how to study them without dismantling one, and that would be a crime." Not to mention that it might undermine the entire Spire system.

"So we take readings and try to examine the artifact with what equipment we have. Even that we have to be careful with. We don't dare use powerful equipment near the Spires. What we're hoping for is that we'll find some pieces in the city below, and then we can do a proper study, but so far we haven't found anything."

It almost sounded like a tourist guide spiel, except that Meklos knew tourists never came here.

He found it curious that they couldn't figure out anything about the Spires. The lack of knowledge, even after a decade of study, made him realize that all those precautions the academics had presented him with were just that: precautions. They were based on guesses, not actual knowledge.

He wondered what they all would think if they knew how many weapons he was bringing into their stronghold. He would wager that they would disapprove. They were probably taking so long on this dig because they couldn't use some of the normal tricks of the trade—sonic cleaners set on a level for delicate work and large equipment to carry dirt and debris out of this area.

"Is this the only path?" Meklos asked.

"It's the only one we use," Chavo said.

"That wasn't my question," Meklos said. "We're here to protect you and your dig. We need to know if there are other ways to access it."

Chavo glanced over his shoulder again, as if someone were watching him. As he turned back, he bit his lower lip.

"There are lots of paths over the peak and through the Spires. This is the only one that is accessible."

"To whom?" Meklos asked. "To your people? Or to machinery? Or to anyone with climbing experience?"

Chavo shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. This is the only one I've ever used."

"How long have you been here?" Meklos asked.

"Two years," Chavo said. "My post-doc focuses on the architecture of the city of Denon as it evolved—"

"Couldn't you study that from some library somewhere?" Phineas asked, obviously unable to contain his contempt any longer.

"I'm an archeologist, and an art historian," Chavo said with no little bit of pride. "This is an area of study that combines both of my disciplines."

"Well, you're testing our discipline," Meklos said. "We're each wearing thirty-five kilograms on our backs and it's hot up here. We'd like to get to that city, find where we're going to camp, and eat a little something."

"No kidding," said one of the voices from the back.

Chavo looked at the pack on Meklos's back as if seeing it for the first time.

"Sorry," he said. "You might have to take that off as we cross the peak. The arch beneath this part of the Spires is pretty narrow."

Meklos frowned. Obviously, then, the original teams hadn't used this path to lug their equipment in.

Chavo climbed ahead of them, waiting near the arch, which barely reached the top of his head. When Meklos joined him, Chavo pointed up. "Your pack gonna hit that?"

"Of course not," Meklos said, but he paused anyway, not because he was uncertain, but because he wanted to get a good look at the Spires up close.

The arch wasn't a true arch. Instead, it was part of the weave. Several branches came together at this point. Two twisted above Meklos to form an even larger patten. Two more branched in from the sides, giving the arch itself a four-point base. The trail went below that base.

"I'm going to make sure the others won't hit it," Chavo said. "So go ahead."

"They'll be fine," Meklos said.

Chavo looked nervously at the rest of the team, climbing single-file behind Meklos, then back at Meklos.

Meklos raised his eyebrows. "After you," he said.

Chavo swallowed, then nodded. He clearly didn't want to go first, but he didn't see any choice.

Meklos smiled to himself. The kid was finally becoming intimidated.

Chavo walked under the arch, then eased himself down the side of the mountain. The trail had to have gotten steep there. Meklos made a mental note of that. He followed, going slowly, so that he could look at the arch as he passed. Chavo wasn't kidding—the Spires had etchings. So far as Meklos could see, each etching was different. Some appeared to be characters, like letters or numbers, and others were drawings. He noted one as he passed, a woman standing beneath this very arch, or something quite similar to it.

He only had to hunch slightly as he walked under the arch. He had plenty of clearance. Even if he hadn't, his pack would have flattened itself against his back to avoid touching anything. It was a design feature he'd neglected to tell Chavo.

The kid didn't need to know everything.

Once Meklos got through the arch, the path turned sharply to the right. That was why Chavo had braced himself as he'd come through. There were more parts to the arch, some actually flattened before Meklos, like a floor.

The path swerved to avoid all of that.

The floor had etchings as well, but he couldn't see them clearly from the path.

What surprised him was that they weren't covered with dust or dirt. Just one day on this mountaintop should have covered that floor in the whitish material that surrounded it.

He swerved with the path, then walked down four steps. Chavo was waiting for him on a stone platform, one that was not part of the Spires. Meklos stopped beside

Chavo, then looked up the mountainside. His team was coming through, one at a time, each examining the Spires as they walked, each showing the same amount of curiosity he had.

"The city's just down there," Chavo said, with no small amount of pride.

Meklos looked. The city sprawled below them as if it had always been exposed to the sun, as if teams of archeologists hadn't uncovered it in the past five years.

Some of the dirt remained along the edges—more, it seemed to Meklos, to prevent climbers from going through the Spires the wrong way than as any integral part of the dig. But the dirt did show how deeply the city had once been buried.

It filled the hollow in the mountain. White buildings, some small, and several quite large, scattered before him. They glimmered in the sunlight.

He realized then that some of the brightness had come from the reflected light off the white substance on the side of the mountain. Add to that the city itself, and his eyes actually hurt.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Chavo asked.

"Astonishing," Meklos said, and meant it. He had seen a lot of amazing things in his career, but never anything like this.

"Wait until you see it up close," Chavo said.

Meklos frowned. He had heard about the ancient city of Denon in school—everyone had. So many of this sector's myths and stories had come from here. The city itself had survived several sieges.

As he looked at it now, though, the idea of surviving a siege here made him shudder. With a more powerful enemy on the mountainside, the inhabitants of the city would not stand a chance.

"Ready?" Chavo asked, leading Meklos to yet another set of stairs.

Meklos nodded. Places usually didn't make him uncomfortable, but this one did. And he wasn't entirely sure why.

4

Navi Salvino clasped her hands behind her back and studied the holographic map floating above the table. She had walked around it now a dozen times, zooming in, zooming out, and still she couldn't decide what to do.

The Naramzin Mountain Range looked formidable all by itself, but the strictures on landing anywhere near the Spires of Denon made this job almost impossible.

She wouldn't be able to get her people into the city of Denon without being seen. She certainly couldn't use weapons, and the newest strictures, made by the Monuments Protection Arm of the Unified Governments of Amnthra, restricted most forms of scanning equipment as well.

The Unified Governments had been suing Scholars Exploration for ownership of the mountaintop itself. Scholars Exploration had used a loophole in some of the local laws to claim ownership of the mountaintop. Apparently the Unified Governments had never designated the Spires a protected area, which was a major mistake.

The Scholars took advantage of major mistakes. They'd become the bully in the sector, at least when it came to research sites.

In the beginning, the Scholars had simply been a way for sector universities to protect their research. A dozen universities had founded Scholars Exploration to give them some clout with the various sector governments. A variety of donors, many wealthy alumni, had provided startup funding for the company decades ago. That start-up money had become a large fortune, thanks to the funds generated by patents, copyrights, sales of land and items made and/or found by the various scholars.



Most people saw the Scholars as a boon to knowledge throughout the sector. Navi saw them as a pain in the ass. She walked around the table yet again. The mountaintop rose as if it had been carved there.

The Spires rose above the white mountaintop, hopelessly delicate. On one of her passes, she had counted sixteen spires, but it was hard to gauge, since they twisted and twined into each other. One branch would rise into a point, while another part of it forked away, wrapping itself around a different spire.

The highest spire stood alone for several meters, white and shining in the simulation, as if lit from within.

If this holographic map was even half as impressive as the Spires themselves, then they were something to behold.

She pressed a button on her wristband, summoning this job's expert. She hated the experts. They were self-important little people who often felt slighted by not being included in some Scholars Exploration expedition.

This particular expert, Jonas Zeigler, hid his disappointment well, but Navi could still feel it, as if she had caused it.

The double doors slid open and he stepped inside, stopping as he gazed on the map. His black bangs flopped over the left side of his narrow face. He wore faded jeans and a cotton top, even though Navi kept her ship at regulation temperature—which meant it was cool, even for her.

Zeigler was a full professor of antiquities and art history at a tiny college at the edge of the sector. His speeches, his dissertation, and his annual works had brought him to Navi's attention. Even though he didn't have a prestige position, he was considered the sector's foremost authority on the Spires—or he had been until Scholars had discovered the City of Denon in the hollow below them.

Zeigler had predicted that find in his now-famous dissertation, published nearly a decade before anyone thought to look for the city. But his tiny college couldn't afford to buy into Scholars, and so he wasn't qualified to lead an expedition into the area.

"You act like you've never seen the Spires." She had to walk behind him and wave her hand at the door, closing it. He hadn't moved since he'd stepped inside.

He shook himself, then took a deep breath. "Not like that," he said. "My school doesn't have the funds for such a sophisticated holounit."

"But you've seen them up close," she said. As a fifteen-year-old, he had hiked up Denon's Secret with his family, long before any archeologists had taken interest in the Spires.

"Up close you can hardly take in a single branch. The entire thing is impossible to see." He finally walked toward the map. "Although . . ."

"Although?" She hated the way he spoke, as if his thoughts raced ahead and he didn't feel as if he had to articulate all of them.

"Although they're much brighter in person. They are so white they actually hurt your eyes." He sounded wistful.

Sometimes places got a hold on people, made them almost worshipful. She'd seen it countless times—people willing to defend a small patch of ground that looked like nothing to her, because it meant something to them.

She hadn't suspected Zeigler of such an attitude, although someone else might have. It took her longer than most to recognize worshipful. She had never worshipped anything. Her work was everything to her, had been since she'd left home at thirteen. She hadn't even fallen in love. Someone would mention a new job, and she would take it, for the challenge mostly, since money and perks didn't matter much to her.

"Last night," she said to Zeigler, "you mentioned something. You said you didn't think the security team would have been hired to protect the city. What did you mean?"

The words had echoed in her head since that moment. The security team had trig-

gered her trip to Amnthra. Even though the Scholars had hired the security team, the request for security hadn't originated with the Scholars.

The request had come directly from the surface itself.

Navi's computer systems were set up to automatically flag actions like that. She'd been monitoring nearly two hundred Scholars projects and sites all over the sector, and whenever something unusual happened, she got flagged. This one intrigued her, because the city had been discovered so recently and it was hard to reach. Historic places that were hard to reach and relatively new to the academic community were often rich with treasures. Zeigler was still looking at the Spires. His silence exasperated her. She asked, "Do you think the team was hired to protect the Spires?"

He gave her a look of such panic that she actually regretted the question. "They're too beautiful to cut up," he said, which wasn't an answer to her question. The fact that he had thought of cutting them up meant someone else probably had as well.

"Could they be sold in parts?" she asked.

He let out a heavy sigh. It sounded almost mournful.

"Anything can be sold in parts," he said.

"So that's what you meant," she said. "You think the team was hired to protect the Spires."

He shook his head, but said no more.

"Then why do you think they hired the team?" she asked.

"The museum," he said after a moment. His tone implied that she knew what the museum was.

She knew of countless museums. Some were attached to the universities. Some were in the wealthier cities throughout the sector. The Scholars had been making noise for years about starting a universal museum, one in the center of the sector, like a space port, complete with restaurants, hotels, and condos. The entire thing could be expanded as the Scholars found more items to put into it.

"Which museum?" she asked when it became clear he wasn't going to elaborate.

He whirled toward her, his face more animated than she had ever seen it.

"I thought you studied my work," he snapped. "You said you were familiar with it."

"I am," she said. She hadn't studied his work; that would have taken too much time. But she had scanned the précis and listened to his detractors as well as his supporters. She'd learned all she could about him as quickly as she could. She simply hadn't had time to familiarize herself with the work itself.

"Everything I've done in the past six years has been about the museum," he said.

"The last six years, you talked about the history of Denonites," she said. "I recall nothing about a museum."

His face flushed. "You listened to the critics. You didn't listen to me."

She sighed, then extended her hands flat, in a gesture of peace. "Guilty," she said. "I don't have the patience for scholarship."

He glared at her, then turned his back on her. He continued to study the Spires.

"So what did the critics miss?" she asked.

"A discovery equal to that of the city itself," he said.

He answered her quicker than she had expected him to. She had thought he would nurse his anger a bit longer.

"Why would they ignore that?"

"Because I'm not on-site," he said. "But I wasn't on-site when I figured out the city's location either."

"So tell me about the museum," she said.

He turned, his expression open. She didn't like the mood swing. She kept her back straight, her face impassive. She wasn't going to encourage this kind of emotionalism—although she would remember it.

He said, "The ancient texts all talked about the spoils of war. The Denonites went to war not for the conquest, but for the spoils."

*So did many communities*, she almost said, but remembered: it was better not to have a dialogue with Zeigler. It would derail him.

"Most scholars," he was saying, "believe the spoils are the standard ones—slaves, property, maybe extending the gene pool. But it always seemed to me to be more than that."

She frowned.

Zeigler reached toward the Spires. He touched them. The hologram encased his fingers.

"I always thought that any people who could create something that beautiful would appreciate beauty. The city bears this out. The new documentation shows that it uses classical designs—ancient Earth designs—in its most prominent buildings."

Then he closed his hand into a fist and pulled it away from the Spires. Navi nodded, to encourage him to continue.

"The Denonites lived in a small community," he said. "It's a jewel. They sent their own undesirables away, let them run the conquered cities. Nothing in the texts talks about slaves or massive troops moving back toward Denon's Secret. There is no mention of a place to keep prisoners or a place to ritually humiliate the losers of any war. So I spent the last few years asking myself this: If they didn't want the traditional spoils, what did they want?"

She was going to be here all day while he explained how he came to his conclusions. God, she hated academics.

"Then I discovered a mention of the caverns," he said.

Suddenly he had her attention.

"Caverns honeycomb that mountain. I think that's how the Denonites survived their many sieges. They weren't in the city when it got attacked. They were below it or beside it or maybe not even in it, if the caverns led to places outside the mountain."

Her breath caught. Marvelous. The caverns would give her a way into the city, a way that could avoid the Spires entirely.

"Do you have proof of this?" she asked.

"Not exact proof," he said.

And she felt her heart sink.

"But," he added, "the texts mention the networks a lot, and then they mention the honeycombs. Only one of those references is in connection with caverns, but that's enough. Because if you look at the Spires, what could they be but a giant map?"

She frowned, and looked at the Spires. They seemed like artwork to her—a way of marking the city long before anyone arrived at it. A monument, something that a culture built because it could.

"A map?" she asked, letting the disbelief into her voice.

"Surround it, not with air, but with dirt," he said. "Then what does it look like?"

She had to squint to imagine that. Then she shook her head.

"It's a network of caves," he said, "with exit points."

She wanted him to be right. She *needed* him to be right. But she didn't believe he was right. Everything he told her was too disjointed.

"But how does that tie to a museum?" she asked.

"It is the museum," he said.

He shoved his hand back into the middle of the hologram.

"This part," he said. "This maze-like network in the center, would be the best place to store artifacts stolen from other cultures. And if the caves look like the Spires, then they're white. Anything with color would jump off the walls, and stand out, even in a large space. Imagine it. It would be the best museum in the sector. Better even

than that thing the Scholars are proposing, because everything in this place would be ancient, and from cultures long gone."

That was the problem. She could imagine it. The wealth would be beyond measure. Immediately her mind turned to the task at hand. "They would need more than fifteen people and some tech to guard this place."

"If they know what they have which I don't think they do," he said. "They stumbled onto the city. They weren't looking at my work. It was an accident."

"You think they have, no idea how far these things extend."

He nodded. "And, since scans from above are limited by law, they have no way to find out."

She turned to the Spires, squinting, trying to see what he saw.

A map.

Navi smiled. If Zeigler was right, he had just given her a way in.

5

**T**hey activated their tents on a flat part of the mountainside half a kilometer above the city.

From this vantage, they could see the city itself—all parts of it—and they would remember that they were here to guard it. Meklos still hadn't figured out how he was going to deploy his people and his equipment. He needed better maps for that. He also needed to know what exactly he'd been hired to protect.

If it was a single building, then he'd send his people there in shifts as well as keep a few stationed near the Spires. If it was the entire city, he might need reinforcements.

This area was vast, something he hadn't realized when he'd taken the job. It wasn't vast in area so much as in sprawl. And it would be difficult to guard against a motivated invader, someone who wanted inside, someone to whom the rules about the Spires of Denon meant nothing. He had one other problem as well. No one had warned him about how bright it was here. Even with proper equipment, the whiteness of the Spires, combined with the white shale on the mountainside and the white buildings below, created a kind of bleary-eyed exhaustion that he hadn't experienced outside snow countries. If he kept his people on shift too long or if they were stationed in the wrong spot, they might experience a kind of snow blindness. And he hadn't checked the planet's cycle in relation to its sun. He had no idea if they would move closer while he was stationed here. If so, the sun would grow brighter, and so would the light.

Even if he sent for better equipment, he still would have to station his people at their posts for half a normal shift. Which meant he would be understaffed.

He wished he'd been able to inspect the site before he'd arrived, as is he had asked to do. But Scholars Exploration, which had hired him, had said the site was too remote to justify the expense.

Then they had tripled his fee.

He'd noted the contradiction, and he understood the reason for it. They didn't want anyone who wasn't on their payroll near the site. And that had piqued his curiosity. This whole job had—partly because of the Spires themselves.

6

**G**abrielle stepped backward, toward the open doorway, and stuck her hands in her back pockets. The temple's main floor extended away from her, fading away into darkness.

Except for the front entrance, which had no door—and hadn't been designed for one—the temple had sealable doors and no windows. Perfect for storage.

It was the largest building in the ancient city, a giant rectangle that stood in the exact center. All the main roads (the ones that the archeologists could clearly define as roads) led to this spot.

She called it a temple, but there was no evidence that the Denonites had been particularly religious. It was just that in previous ancient societies, buildings with this general shape and focus always ended up being the center of the religion. Yusef believed it was some kind of government building, but he couldn't suggest what kind.

The main floor was one long open space. There wasn't even an altar or a place with a platform so that someone could stand above a crowd and make speeches.

The walls were plain white, like the exterior walls, but the floor was a marvel. It was an inlaid replica of the Spires of Denon. As the careful cleaning commenced, she realized that the floor's design wasn't white against blue as she had initially thought. The Spires went from a warm reddish color to lighter shades of rose, finally becoming a faint white. Only near the top, where the Spires supposedly touched the sun, did the drawing itself become a spectacular white.

She had initially planned on covering the floor, but she wasn't sure whether or not it would ruin the artwork. Her specialists thought that even a raised floor could scratch the image below.

So she had to be careful. On the areas where there was no artwork, she had installed the raised floor. She would put up half walls around those areas. She needed them for the final cleaning, sorting and classification. Then the artifact, whatever it was, would get moved to the correct part of the floor until it could go to its assigned destination. The problem, of course, would be the larger items. She wasn't even sure where to store them, let alone how to work with them. And if she had to remove any of them from the city . . .

She shook her head. She had already commandeered a couple of buildings near the temple, but none were as sturdy. One of the post-docs suggested leaving the larger artifacts where she'd found them, which sounded well and good, until they tried to deal with the artifacts in the flooded part of the caverns.

Not that she knew for certain there were artifacts in that part of the caverns. Even though the guards had shown up, the special cave divers she'd sent for were delayed on another job.

Someone touched her arm, and she jumped.

She turned. Yusef stood next to her, his eyes twinkling.

She had been so deep in thought, she hadn't even heard him approach.

"What?" she asked.

"The guards you hired," he said, "they want to talk to you."

She suppressed a sigh. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to a group of guards.

She hadn't given them much thought. She had asked the Scholars to hire some security guards and to make sure they weren't thugs. She didn't want careless people blundering their way through the delicate parts of the city.

If she had been able to afford it, she would have hired them herself. But she'd had her hands full with hiring the cave divers. She didn't want the Scholars to know she had even found caves, until she knew exactly what those caves were and what treasures they contained.

She sighed. She didn't want to deal with the guards, but she was clearly going to have to.

"Where are they?" she asked.

"He," said a voice behind her. "And he's right here."

She turned. The man who stood behind her wasn't as large as she'd expected a

guard to be. He was not much taller than she was, and his muscles looked real, not the enhanced kind that made a man seem like he had inserted cotton under his skin. The guard's hair was a little too long, and his dark eyes were wary.

"I'm Meklos Verr," he said. "I'm in charge of the security team."

She didn't have to ask where the rest of the team was. That was obvious. She had seen the automated tents blossom on the inside of the crater. They weren't too far from her initial base camp.

"Gabrielle Reese," she said. "I'm in charge of this mess."

He glanced at the entrance behind him. "It's much less of a mess than I expected."

"We've had years on the upper layer of the city, but there's so much more work to be done."

He nodded, then looked at Yusef. The look held dismissal, and just a little contempt. She put her hand on Yusef's arm. If she hadn't, he would have left without Meklos saying a word. That was power. Amazing that such a slight man in such an unimportant position had it.

"I need to talk with you about the security arrangements," Meklos said.

She nodded, but didn't let go of Yusef's arm.

"I think the fewer who are privy to them the better." Meklos's tone made it sound like what he had just said was the opening salvo in a conversation, not a cue to dismiss Yusef.

She had to give it a second of consideration. Normally, she would include Yusef in any conversation. But Yusef seemed to make the guard uncomfortable. It was just easier to do what the guard wanted. Then they could be done with this conversation.

She let go of Yusef's arm. "It's all right. I'll join everyone for lunch in about an hour."

Yusef flushed. He gave Meklos a furtive glance, frowned, then scurried off.

Gabrielle had never seen Yusef move like that.

"You scared him," she said in wonder.

Meklos's eyes moved slightly. She had a feeling she had surprised him.

"Very good," he said. "Most people wouldn't have noticed."

"It was pretty obvious," she said. "I've never seen him react like that."

"Hm," Meklos said. It wasn't an answer. It wasn't even really a word. It was, however, a dismissal, as if her opinion didn't count for much.

"Are you going to do that all the time?" she asked.

"Scare your people?" he asked.

She nodded.

He shrugged. "Depends on if it's part of my job."

"Your job is to guard the dig," she said.

"That's what it said on the hire." He shifted his weight slightly, without moving his feet. "But I'm not sure what that means. Or who I'm guarding it from."

She frowned. She hadn't expected to have to talk to him. She had expected him and his team to get to work the moment they arrived. Clearly the Scholars hadn't explained this job to them. Of course, how hard could a guard job be?

She mentally shrugged. People in Meklos's line of work were, by definition, not that bright. She's have to tell him what to do.

"All right," she said. "You need to protect us from anyone who wants to see the city. At the moment, anyone can view the Spires—from a safe distance. We—"

"Which is?" he asked.

He had derailed her train of thought. "Excuse me?"

"What's the safe distance?"

She frowned at him. "You were told the distances when you arrived. The protected area begins at the base of the mountain. No one can climb it and no one can come near the Spires. They're fragile."



"They don't look fragile," he said. "Up close they look amazingly sturdy."

"They're fragile," she repeated. He was irritating her. She didn't like her statements questioned.

He opened his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "All right," he said. "They're fragile." She crossed her arms.

"Go on," he said.

She had lost her place. He had asked what the rules for protection were. She sighed deeply, then nodded once.

"No one comes up the mountainside without our permission. No one gets into the city without our permission."

"Okay," he said. "Got that. What else?"

"Soon we'll be taking some items from the city to another site for cleaning, grading, and inspection. We're going to need protection for those operations."

"Another site," he said. "On Amnthra?"

Her cheeks had grown warm. "Where that site is doesn't matter right now."

"Oh, but it does," he said. "Because if we're making a land trip, we'll need the right equipment. It'll probably take longer. If we're using some kind of jumper to get across the planet, then we'll need to know weight limits. We may need an extra jumper or two so that we have the correct amount of personnel and equipment going with the items. Honestly, the more I know, the better job I'll do."

She didn't want him to know. She didn't want him in the middle of her work.

She would tell him details like that when the time came. Maybe by then, she would know how to control him. "We'll make the plans for item removal later," she said. "It's not something we need to think about now."

"Well," he said. "We might want to, because if we require help or additional equipment—"

"I said, we don't need to think about it now."

He stared at her for a moment. His entire expression had gone flat. "All right."

"We're done now," she snapped.

He shook his head just once. "I'm sorry, Ms. Reese—Dr. Reese? Gabrielle?"

"Dr. Reese," she said, even though everyone on her team called her Gabrielle.

"Dr. Reese," he said. "I still have a lot of questions."

"I don't have time for them," she said.

"Then who do I talk to? Because we're not starting work until these questions are answered."

She bit her lower lip so hard she could taste blood, something she hadn't done in a long time. "I think you've forgotten, Meklos, that you work for me."

"Actually, no, I don't, Dr. Reese." His voice was calm. That galled her. While she was furious at him, he didn't seem to have any emotions concerning her at all. "If you check the agreement—"

"I didn't see the agreement. That's between you and Scholars."

"It's about you and how our operations run," he said. "Once security understands its job, we take precedence. If we tell you the area needs to be evacuated immediately, you evacuate immediately. If we tell you that we have proof someone is a threat, that someone—no matter how valuable they appear—will leave the premises. If you would like a copy of the agreement, I can have it sent directly to you. I'm not sure exactly where you'd like it—"

"I'll get a copy from the Scholars." Her cheeks were hot now, and had to be bright red. There was no way to hide how angry he had made her.

"Good," he said. "You'll see that I'm right. So, in the spirit of cooperation, let me ask a few more questions."

She sighed heavily so that he understood what an inconvenience this all was.

"I need to know how much access we get to the site." He waited as if he expected an answer to that immediately.

"What do you mean, access?"

"Are we allowed in the dig sites? Can we get off the paths near the Spires without damaging something important?"

She waved a hand. She had no idea, and she wasn't about to tell him that. So she said, "Just list your questions. I'll answer the ones I can right now, and I'll send you to the right people for the others."

"All right." His back straightened, as if she had finally upset him. "I need to know whether we protect from the air as well as the ground. I need to know if we pay attention to ships in orbit. I need to know if we monitor communications—"

"My god," she said. "It'll take half my life to direct you people. I just wanted some guards."

He ignored that and continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I need to know who you think wants to get onto this site, and if those people have theft or sabotage in mind. I need to know if anyone's life has been threatened."

"Sabotage?" she asked, feeling cold. "You think someone might come in here and ruin this?"

"I don't think anything, Dr. Reese. I need to know what your concerns are. Most importantly, I need to know which members of your staff and crew we can trust, which ones we need to monitor, and which ones we need to watch zealously."

She felt a little woozy. She must have been holding her breath.

"This is not what I expected when I told Scholars to hire you," she said.

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"That you'd come in, stand guard, and let us get on with our work."

"We'll do that, ma'am," he said. "Just as soon as we know what we're guarding, who we're guarding it from, and how much access we have."

She hadn't given it any thought at all. Did she want his people to guard the city itself or just the access routes? And what were the access routes?

And then there was the question of her staff and crew. She didn't trust any of them. She never told them anything except what they needed to know.

At the same time, she trusted them implicitly. She sent them to work on sites without supervision. She wasn't sure how to explain the contradiction to this man.

"I take it your behavior is not unusual for your line of work," she said to him.

That thin smile rose on his lips. This time, he didn't try to hide the contempt.

"If you want to hire someone else, go ahead," he said. "Just remember, in your initial communiqué with Scholars, you asked for the best security team they could find."

She hadn't asked for that. All she had asked for were some guards. Obviously, someone in Scholars figured she needed more than simple guards.

Dammit.

He was saying, "They found us. Whoever they send next may not ask as many questions, may not be as annoying from the start, but they may not be as good, either."

She wasn't sure she cared about good. She wasn't sure she cared about any of this at all. But he was here. They were here. They'd do as she asked when the time came. Until then, she would stall. "I don't think of my people the way you want me to," she said.

He said, "Then maybe it's time you start."

Navi finally forced herself to look at Zeigler's scholarly works. Since she and her team were orbiting Amnthra waiting for something to come out of the City of De-

non—more communications, maybe items in transit, maybe the arrival of more security—she didn't have a lot to do except think.

And she'd been thinking a great deal since her conversation with Zeigler.

She kept staring at the holomap. She had brightened the Spires so that they looked almost blinding, although Zeigler said even that wasn't correct.

Then she had two of her assistants look through geologic records to see if anyone had mapped caves in the Naramzin Mountain Range.

The mountains, it turned out, were mostly unexplored—or at least, they hadn't been explored in the modern era. Only mountain climbers, adventurers, and extreme athletes had gone up there until the archeologists and scholars descended upon the Spires of Denon as if they were some kind of holy relic.

She couldn't even tell what had caused the descent—whether it was some scholarly discovery or a meeting or something that happened in passing.

Zeigler's research was meticulous. She had started with the works he'd published six years ago, and worked her way forward. She hadn't cared as much about his hypothesis about the City of Denon, the hypothesis that had turned out to be right. She probably should have, because if he'd used similar logic and proof to find the caverns, then she could really trust his conclusions.

Only she somewhat trusted them now, and she barely had the patience to go through the six years of research. The idea of going over his entire life's work gave her the shudders.

Zeigler made his presentations in lectures, holovids, actual documents, and at conferences where his words were recorded, as well as the question and answer sessions. All of his raw research was easily accessible, unlike some work she'd seen. Some scholars made it hard to dig through the raw materials, but Zeigler clearly wasn't afraid of someone stealing his positions.

He obviously wanted his work to be transparent, so that the other scholars would realize how correct he was.

It had taken her days to go through the material, and she still wasn't done. But she was convinced: there were caverns beneath the City of Denon.

The problem was, she'd had her ship's sensors go over the mountain range. The area around the Spires was blocked. Every time a sensor touched the area, the stream got bounced back to her ship with a warning:

*Energy of any kind could destroy a valuable part of Amnthra. The Spires of Denon are a preserved monument to the ancient past. If your work destroys even a small portion of the Spires, you will be subject to the Monument Protection Arm of the Unified Governments of Amnthra. . . .*

All of that, followed by legal codes and legal language. The upshot—years in an Amnthran prison or something equivalent in other parts of the sector, her ship's license removed, and her travel privileges permanently suspended. Even if she didn't get the prison sentence, the other items terrified her more.

She stopped using the sensor. It hadn't compiled any information from the nearby mountains, either. They had come up blank on her data screen, which was odd. As if they were simply a holographic feature of the land, something she knew was not true.

She had experienced sensor white-out on other jobs. Usually the sensors stopped functioning because of a protective field, but she couldn't believe one existed so close to the Spires.

Although something had to exist, given the way her own beam had come back to her, along with a message. But she hadn't traced that message. It could have come from any part of Amnthra, activated when her sensor touched the protective barrier near the Spires.

She would figure all of that out when she needed to. Right now, she was trying to

customize one of the holomaps of the mountain range. She looked up when her assistant, Roze Bruget, came into the room.

It wasn't really fair to call Roze an assistant. He was more like a part of her. They had worked together from her very first job, and he had saved her butt more times than she wanted to think about.

Sometimes she felt that even though she was nominally in charge, Roze knew more about the way everything worked. Her team usually trusted him to be the voice of reason on her jobs. She could be snappish, short, and difficult on good days. Roze was always cheerful, always willing to help.

Unless someone made him angry.

He was a slight, precise man. He wore casual clothes—a shirt and light pants with some slipper-like shoes. The clothes themselves looked pressed, and his hair was so manicured it looked like it had been glued to his head.

"You might want to see this," he said without greeting her.

He moved in front of her to the in-room control panel. He saved her work, moved the holomap to one side, and then did some light touchwork on the panel.

She looked at the translation running across the screen in front of her. "You broke the Scholars' encryption," she said.

"This wasn't Scholars," he said. "It came from outside their system. The request is direct from the folks in the City of Denon."

She read the request twice. Her heart was pounding. "They want divers?"

"Not any divers," he said. "Cave divers."

"You're sure this isn't a translation error?" she asked. "They don't want spelunkers? They want divers? People who'll go into water in darkness, in caves?"

"Divers," he said.

She let out a small breath. This opened up a wealth of possibilities. It meant that caves and water existed below the ancient city. Maybe a river. Which would explain how the ancients lived there through countless sieges without massive deaths.

It also gave her a lot of opportunities. If she had the right equipment, she might be able to map the caves using sensors on the ground.

The Unified Governments of Amntha expected sensors from above, but did they expect them from ground level? Probably not. And then there was the other possibility.

She looked at Roze, her eyes shining. "Did you bring our diving equipment?"

He grinned. "I'm prepared for any emergency, my friend."

She grinned in response.

"This isn't an emergency, Roze," she said. "This is an opportunity."

"One of the best we've ever had," he said.

8

Meklos sat on the hard floor of his tent. The tent was elaborate—nicer, in fact, than the way the academics were living in the city below. His tent had three separate rooms—the main room, where he was now and where he often held meetings; a smaller room to the side that he used as a bedroom; and a fully functional bathroom, complete with sonic or water shower depending on the conditions on the ground.

He had opted for a sonic shower, since it looked like water was scarce here. But no one on the academic team acted like water was scarce, so he might have to reassess that opinion.

He had sent Phineas to get maps from Dr. Reese's assistant, and to remain until he had the latest maps of all the areas, complete with the listings of treasures and protected items. Meklos had a hunch Phin might be gone for a while.

Meklos knew that Dr. Reese was holding something back from him. He just couldn't figure out what it was.

At least she had finally told him what she needed—protection against thieves, just like he had suspected. Now that the city of Denon was mostly dug out, the academics would set about finding the valuable items, marking them, and figuring out what to do with them. Amnthra had no laws protecting individual artifacts, meaning the kind that could be moved from one place to another. The Monuments Protection Arm of the Unified Governments of Amnthra hadn't been formed that long ago, and so far, it only applied to things that were defined as part of the land of Amnthra. Their legislation did specifically mention the Spires of Denon and the City of Denon as protected. But the word "city" wasn't really defined, and that already presented a problem, at least to Meklos. Because the definition of city in most Amnthran languages was the same as it was in Meklos's language—a densely populated center.

Which meant that the City of Denon wasn't a city at all. If someone tried to get picky about the legal definitions, he had a hunch they would be able to argue that the City of Denon, as a location, was protected, but movable items within that city, like paintings or jewelry, were not. Even that marvelous inlaid floor he had walked across that morning didn't belong to the city. Because if the floor were removed, the city would remain.

He needed a definition because he needed to know what could remain in this part of Amnthra and what could be removed. He documented everything—his assumptions, his ideas, and his worries—in case Dr. Reese or, worse, the Scholars disagreed with him. If they disagreed with him, it would probably mean that he had let someone walk off with a part of the city proper.

At least he hoped that was what it would mean. Because the other option was that he had to protect the City from the academics themselves.

Dr. Reese had finally conceded that some of the academics couldn't be trusted. The interns, the post-docs, the guest experts—anyone who wasn't part of her initial team—had to be searched coming in and going out of the area.

As for her initial team, she'd said she would consider searching them as well, but that sounded dismissive, as if she hoped Meklos would forget he had asked.

He wouldn't forget.

Dr. Reese would soon learn that Meklos rarely forgot anything.

## 9

**G**abrielle had finally finished laying out the temple. She had marked off areas, and set up shifts so that the interns (at least the well-trained ones) could begin cleaning off artifacts.

She knew which artifacts she wanted out of the City first. Not the most valuable ones—she would save those until later. First, she wanted some tiny but valuable objects to go to the Scholars, with the message that yes, there was more, and no, she really didn't care which institutions got what pieces.

In truth, she did care, which was why she was sending the less valuable items. However, most of her team did not know which items were extremely valuable and which weren't. Certain items, like statues in one of the houses not far from here, were too big to carry out, at least at the moment.

She was sitting on the temple steps, drinking purified water. The water had a chalky taste that no amount of filtering could get rid of. The water had come from the caverns below. She had known that the ground water was safe to drink since they'd discovered a small spring not far from the city itself.

But the discovery of the larger caverns made her feel even better about drinking the water. Now she knew there was enough to support her people for a long time to come, she had no qualms about using the recycled water for showers and artifact cleansing.

The sun had reached its zenith. She'd learned to recognize it by the way the light fell around the temple. Actually, the light didn't fall as much as it blazed. The entire area became so bright that she wore extra eye protection out here.

Even then the brightness was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen. The Spires reflected the sun in all directions, acting like some kind of beacon, sending light cascading down the white part of the mountainside. Then the light hit the white buildings, which reflected it all back to the Spires.

She'd first experienced the blazing whiteness after the tops of the first buildings were uncovered. She had cleaned the tops, just to see what the original buildings looked like. Then the sun reached its zenith, the Spires flared and the light cascaded down. She felt as if she were inside a sunlight machine. Her skin—her assistants' skin, everyone's skin—burned. They'd had to put the dirt back on the buildings until they'd figured out how to deal with the flare of whiteness.

Now, years later, she was no longer frightened of the light and its power. Now, she sat outside and ate her mid-afternoon snack, watching the light reflect, bounce, and reflect again.

The light was her favorite part of this dig—indeed, her favorite part of any dig—and ironically enough (at least to her) she couldn't take it with her. This light phenomenon would remain part of Amntha forever.

She sighed and turned her face upward. She had skin protectors now, as well as the eye protections. Still, she believed that there was an addictive aspect to the light. When she spent a few of her days in the caves below, she had had a palpable mood shift, one that didn't get corrected until an afternoon in the light bath. Sometimes that feeling of addiction worried her, made her wonder if she could survive away from this place. Fortunately, that problem was far in her future. She had so much work to do here that she doubted she'd leave for a long time.

"Gabrielle?"

Yusef.

She tilted her face away from the Spires, blinked several times to clear her eyes, and then looked at him.

He handed her a small communications pad, but her eyes were so sunblinded that she couldn't see the screen. Or maybe it just wasn't visible in this light.

She handed it back to him. "I can't see it."

"Come inside." He climbed up the stairs to the inside of the temple.

She sighed, glanced up at the Spires, and watched the shifting light for just a moment. Then she stood—slowly, she'd learned not to stand quickly after a light bath—and went into the temple.

It was at least fifteen degrees cooler inside, maybe more. The dim light, which seemed perfect when she was working here, seemed like the dark of night after the light bath.

She stood in place until her eyes adjusted.

"What is it?" she asked as she took the pad.

"We have divers," he said. "If we want them."

His voice had that odd tone again. She frowned, then tapped the screen. The notification had come back in her personal code: two cave divers nearby, willing to work for a lower price than she had expected, so long as their expenses and insurance costs got met.

"They're not bonded," he said, "and they're not on any approved list of divers. But they're the closest."



"Did you vet them?" she asked.

He nodded. He'd clearly been working in the old Command Center at the base of the mountain rather than with the communications equipment here. The equipment in the city itself wasn't that powerful, and wouldn't have allowed much more than a quick search of nearby archives.

"They seem clean enough. Their records go way back," he said.

"But?"

"No real references," he said.

She clutched the pad. The guards wouldn't like the lack of references. Or, more clearly, that Meklos Verr wouldn't like it.

But she wasn't working for him. He was working for her.

"I'm not sure it matters," she said. "We need them to see how deep the water runs, if there are any artifacts in the caverns underwater, and where the water actually came from—if they can find that. What else?"

"Nothing," Yusef said.

"They wouldn't even really know what they're seeing, right?" Her heart was pounding. She and Yusef had only had a handful of conversations like this one over the years. The conversations made her uncomfortable, but they'd been necessary.

"Not if we do it right, no, they wouldn't," he said.

"And if they reported only to us . . . ?"

"Then we should be all right," he said.

She bit her lower lip. The second time that day. She was more nervous than she realized.

"And if we're not all right," Yusef said, "then we . . . I don't know . . ."

"It's a risk," she said. "We're hiring them for risky work. Can we afford the insurance payout if it fails?"

He blanched. He always blanched when she asked questions like this.

"Only if it's a one-time payout," he whispered.

No injuries, then. Nothing that would last or linger.

"Do they have families?" she asked.

"Not according to the records. But lots of people in odd jobs never record their families. They're usually running from their families."

"Check on that," she said. "Because if there are no families, then there's probably no one to even pay the insurance to if something goes wrong. If they have no obvious families, then I think we take the risk. Just you and I. You do know something about diving equipment, right?"

"Enough," he said. His voice shook.

She stared at him. He stared back. Sixteen times they'd had this conversation. Sixteen. And out of those sixteen times, they'd only had to take the hard action four times.

No one else knew.

No one else could know.

"What about Meklos Verr?" she asked. "Will the security team get in the way?"

"Have you told them about the caves?" Yusef asked.

She shook her head.

"You have to," he said.

"No, I don't," she said. "I'm just going to tell them we've found water, and we need to make sure that it's not undermining the city."

"The guy in charge seems smart. He'll know you're lying."

"Only if you tell him," she said. "No one else has been in the caves."

Yusef sighed. "Then I guess we have to keep it that way, don't we?"

"At least for a while," she said.

They landed their air-to-ground deep exploration ship on the far side of Denon's Secret, far away from the sanctioned trails that wound their way up the mountainside. Even though the ship was in a forest of some kind, she still had the pilot camouflage the craft.

She didn't want anything to go wrong.

Because of that, she hadn't brought Zeigler, even though he had begged.

Shortly after the ship arrived, Navi ran the scanning equipment. If the Unified Governments of Amntha had some kind of law against scanning from the ground near the Spires of Denon, she wanted to be the one who broke it. She could argue necessity and flash her credentials.

By the time the Unified Governments figured out that she was subject to the same rules as everyone else, she'd be long gone. But she hadn't gotten a notice about the scan, like she did when they tried to scan Denon's Secret from above. The scan worked. She found caves.

The images on her screen looked familiar—a tangle just like Zeigler predicted. She bet if she put a two-dimensional image of the Spires of Denon on top of the image before her, one part of it would match.

She didn't have time for that. She had to find exits from the City of Denon that didn't show up on any modern map. So far, it looked like this side of the mountain had about two dozen of them.

It had taken Meklos two days to figure out the best way to deploy his team.

Fifteen wasn't enough. Fifteen wasn't close to enough. If he ran long shifts, he only had seven actual humans on the ground. He and Phineas had to monitor the robots and the various detectors. Since he and Phin were on opposite shifts, they wouldn't see each other except when they relieved each other.

He didn't like that set-up at all. Usually he and Phin coordinated and put an able but less important team member on the equipment.

He had already sent for reinforcements.

They wouldn't come for a week. He'd stressed the urgency, but he couldn't name the threat, so he knew he'd gone into the queue behind some less important but more easily definable jobs.

And now, Dr. Reese had thrown him another curve. She had hired two new experts to come into the city. She wouldn't define their area of expertise, nor would she let him vet them.

*They're my responsibility, Meklos, she'd said in that snotty tone of hers, and no matter how much he argued, he couldn't convince her otherwise. So he was going to meet them near the old Command Center at the base of the mountain.*

Instead of pulling one of his seven-member team off recon, he woke Phin just before heading to the Command Center. He also took two members of Phin's team with him down the mountainside. They would set up as if they were guarding the Command Center.

When Meklos had asked to accompany Chavo to the newcomers' ship, Dr. Reese had denied his request. *I need to see exactly what they're flying and where it came from, Meklos said. They're vetted, Dr. Reese said. And besides, you'll escort them into the city and out of the city. They won't be able to do anything.*

Little did she know. He'd seen a single person disrupt one of the most orderly jobs he'd had. That person had destroyed everything in a short period of time. So he pulled rank on Dr. Reese again, and told her that he would inspect the newcomers' equipment and supplies. What he didn't tell her was that he would take their names and any other identifying information and vet them himself.

Meklos had sent Valma Tanis to the old Command Center ahead of him. He and Declan Ceema, who had been with him almost since Meklos had begun security work, climbed down the mountainside together.

Going down was considerably harder than coming up. He hadn't quite realized how steep the grade was. Fortunately, his hands were free. He carried his usual weapons—a laser pistol (even though they were banned near the Spires), a knife, and a small explosive charge that he didn't dare use near the top of the mountain. All of those were hidden away on his person. Most people wouldn't be able to see the weapons at all, just his small comm unit, attached to his hip.

Declan had similar weapons, although not the explosive, since Meklos didn't want a member of his team forgetting where they were and accidentally causing damage to the Spires.

The old Command Center had been the original base for the first Scholars team to come to Denon's Secret. The team had arrived shortly after some members of a mountain climbing expedition realized that the Spires weren't some kind of natural phenomenon.

Initial Scholars teams were so well funded that they always built a command and control center. The center had sleeping quarters, a fully stocked kitchen, indoor plumbing, and a communications array that rivaled the ones on many ships.

The building itself was located below the lines that the Monuments Protection Arm had designated to protect the Spires. He suspected the line was designed to exclude the Command Center, since it predated not only the line, but the Monuments Protection Arm as well.

He appreciated the lack of designation—because it meant that he could use the communications equipment without worrying about damaging the Spires. He suspected he would have a lot of work to do here, even after he had vetted the newcomers.

His other team member waited outside the Command Center's main door. Valma Tanis was a tall woman. She wore shorts and a T-shirt that bared her muscular arms despite the sunburn threat. Long ago, she had led a military unit stationed on a planet hotter and brighter than this one; the implants she got as part of that service would allow her to stand in light two times brighter than this without any noticeable skin damage.

"Any sign of them?" Meklos asked.

The center itself stood in the exact middle of the path that Chavo and the two newcomers would take to come up the mountainside.

"Not yet," Valma said. "I checked for ships. They have a single space cruiser parked in the designated zone. The ship is small and had to have come from a relatively short distance away."

"How short?" Meklos asked.

"The nearest star base is about the extent of its range."

He felt a surge of irritation. If Dr. Reese had told him more about these two, he wouldn't worry about such things as ships and ranges and travel times.

"Any identifying marks?" he asked.

"Just commercial ones. The ship was purchased from a regular dealer, without any government or business labels. It's not connected to the Scholars, and it's not part of any known business."

Which could be good and bad. If they weren't affiliated, then they had no real con-

tacts, and couldn't be expected to have any kind of back-up. Or the ship looked deliberately innocuous, to make anyone who wanted to check on it relax their guard.

"Ships in orbit?" he asked.

"More than I care to count," she said. "This center doesn't have the equipment to surreptitiously scan them, but I did check with the Unified Governments, and they say nothing out of the ordinary is going on up there."

Well, that was something, at least. He gazed down the trail. It was quite a hike from the designated parking area, and if the two newcomers didn't know how to pack, they'd be struggling by the time they got here.

Declan came around the building. He was short and squat, stronger than he looked and older as well. His fatigues were covered with the red dust from this lower section of the mountain.

"They're winding their way around the last part of the trail," he said. "Chavo, a man, and a woman. They have professional level backpacks."

"Any idea who they are?" Meklos asked.

"I can go inside, scan, and see if I get identifiers," Declan said.

Meklos shook his head. He could see them now, both taller than the too-thin Chavo. "There isn't time."

He turned to Valma. "Get them water," he said.

She nodded and disappeared into the command center. He should have thought of that earlier. People were much more willing to subject themselves to search when they thought the people searching them were kind.

She came back out with three chilled bottles in her right hand just as Chavo and the other two arrived. Chavo saw Meklos and rolled his eyes. Meklos ignored him.

Meklos stepped forward and extended his hand. "Meklos Verr, head of security."

The woman was the one who took his hand, which meant she was the one in charge.

"Navi Salvino," she said, "and my partner, Royce Bruget."

Meklos nodded at Valma. She handed out the water. Bruget put the bottle against his forehead and closed his eyes. Obviously the heat was getting to him already.

Salvino opened her bottle and took a dainty sip. She seemed fine, but Meklos didn't know if that was an act or not.

"I'm sorry," he said as gently as he could. "I need you to state your purpose here so that I can check it against our logs."

"We're the cave divers that Dr. Reese sent for," Salvino said.

Salvino's words so shocked him that he nearly repeated what she'd said to make sure he'd heard it correctly. Cave divers? Dr. Reese had said nothing about caves. If caves honeycombed a mountain like Denon's Secret, then they were a security risk, and one he should have known about from the very beginning.

Meklos hoped his shock hadn't shown on his face. He glanced at Chavo, who shrugged. Apparently he hadn't known either.

Declan had moved slightly into a more defensive position. Valma watched warily from the side of the path.

"We need to search your packs," Meklos said.

"Sure," Salvino said.

She slid her pack off her shoulders and set it on the ground. Bruget did the same, opening his quickly, then stepping back.

Salvino stepped back as well. They'd clearly been searched many times before.

"We'll need to search you as well," Declan said.

They both nodded.

Valma watched. Meklos had been shot once during a search. He'd been so focused on the search that he'd forgotten to keep an eye on the people whose items he was going through. Ever since, he'd had three people on a potential search: two to search

and one to watch. The packs were a revelation. He'd worked with water divers before. They always had breathing equipment, some kind of environmental suit, and supplies, but these two also had recording technology, a variety of lights, and special sonar. He didn't see the breathing equipment.

He held up one of the sonar pieces. "You'll have to clear that with Dr. Reese. You might be operating it too close to the Spires."

As he mentioned the Spires, both Salvino and Bruget looked up, their mouths open slightly.

Declan ignored the movement. He continued the hands-on search, then followed it with a full body scan.

"Clean," he said.

Meklos pulled out one of the suits. "This seems more like a space diving suit than a water diving suit."

Salvino shook her head. "It's made specially for cave diving," she said. "You can get trapped in a very small space in a cave, and you need to survive, sometimes for a day or more, while you're waiting for your partner to go for help. Which is why, you'll note, we also have an extra suit, in case there are divers above who could assist."

Meklos wasn't sure he believed the explanation. He had done water diving himself, but never with a suit this thin. Suits like this worked best in the vacuum of space. The oxygen was threaded through the material instead of in sturdy containers worn at the hip.

He always thought suits like this dangerous because they could rip so easily, which would disturb the oxygen flow. Still, he noted the make of the suits, and the design number. He would vet those as well. Otherwise he found nothing in the packs. He slid them back to their owners for repacking.

The other thing he noticed about the packs was that they had no room for extras. Everything inside had a purpose for this trip, and there was no way any of it could be left behind.

If these two people wanted to smuggle something out of the City of Denon, they would have to do it by leaving all of their equipment behind.

"Okay," he said after catching Declan's nod. "You're ready to go up. Declan and Valma will join you. Chavo here will give you both the speech about the Spires as you climb. If you need more water, say so now. It'll only get hotter the higher we go."

Neither Salvino nor Bruget looked surprised when he said that, which bothered him. He had been surprised about the warmth up top, and he had researched the Naramzin Mountain Range as well as the Spires. Maybe their research was more thorough. Or maybe they weren't just experts in cave diving. Maybe they were experts in something else as well.

He hoped he would have enough time to find out.

## 12

Navi climbed slowly, pretending she wasn't familiar with the path. In truth, she'd studied it for nearly a week. The path and the Spires and the ground around it all, as well as the designated areas.

She also had a complete map of the caverns, made with her scanning equipment. The deep exploration ship was where she had left it, with her people inside. They could no longer send her updates, but she didn't need them. Unless there were cave ins or some serious problems (and, honestly, wouldn't the cave-ins have shown up in the scan?), all they had to do was wait for her all-clear.

She could finally understand why Zeigler had fallen in love with this place. The

light alone was refreshing, even though it was amazingly bright. The Spires were spectacular. She was actually excited about seeing the city.

The diving worried her—she hadn't done anything like that in a long time—but it would end quickly. She had lied about the timing to that security guard. These caverns and passageways were too honeycombed to get lost in for long. As long as she had a partner and as long as they were vigilant about going one at a time, only one could get trapped. And they had the equipment to get that person out, which the guard hadn't really said anything about. Maybe he hadn't noticed. More likely, her ruse was working.

She wasn't sure how long it would. That guard looked smarter than she liked. And while all of the information she had set up on nearby databases about her cave diving experience was true, it wasn't complete. She had left off dates and travel times because they were too far apart for a professional cave diver.

Someone smart might also realize that most of her cave diving experience was near archeological digs like this one. She'd tried to cover it in the bio she'd created, saying that she specialized in diving digs, but she wasn't sure that was enough.

And since she'd used her own name, there was always the possibility that someone who dug deep enough might find out how she really made her living. Then she'd be in trouble. But she wasn't going to think about that. She was going in, she was going to inspect the site, she would do her dive, and she would leave.

After that, she would decide what to do next.

### 13

The information on the cave divers was clean, but sparse. Meklos didn't like sparse. It was his experience that sparse was rare. In general, there was too much information on most people, and even more on most businesses.

Meklos was hunched over the control board, looking at an actual screen. The command center was quiet. He was alone.

He hadn't worked on equipment this old in quite a while. He hated how slow the information flow was. He had a limited amount of time, and the system itself was holding him back.

The fact that he could only find the necessary information on the cave divers made him suspicious. It seemed like information had been removed from their bios.

He could always find added information. Added information announced itself, often by being in the wrong place. Added information also had the wrong or misleading dates; or dates that didn't somehow jibe with other dates already in the biographical information. But when information was removed, the gaps weren't as obvious. The gaps could simply be that: gaps. It would take time he didn't have to prove that the missing information was somehow important. He would have done all of that if he had been consulted *before* Dr. Reese hired these people. If Dr. Reese had problems with her cave divers, those problems would be her own fault. He had to file a report for Scholars—the standard weekly update—and he would note the lack of consultation.

He would also remark that, even though Dr. Reese had requested a security team, she didn't really seem to want one. She certainly wasn't working with him, and the lack of cooperation made his job that much harder.

He also made note of the caves.

He sighed. One reason he couldn't properly vet the cave divers was that he wanted to see what he could find on the caves. He had a hunch that Dr. Reese would lie to him about them. So far as he could tell, no one knew that caves existed beneath the City of Denon.



Some academic from a college too small to be in the Scholars system postulated that caves existed beneath the city; he figured it was the only way the ancients could survive all the sieges. He also postulated a river running through those caves as well. But that was just an hypothesis, not fact.

Meklos figured if Dr. Reese had hired cave divers, she had found caves—and they were filled with water.

He wondered what else she was searching for. He doubted she would tell him.

He could only hope that he would figure it out before there was any trouble. But he doubted even that.

## 14

**B**y the time they'd reached the City of Denon, Navi was exhausted. She was getting too old for this much exercise, particularly in an environment as hostile as this one. The heat was oppressive, the light brighter than anything she could have imagined. Her pack's normal weight seemed too much for her.

Too many months on the ship, doing exercise in artificial gravity, and not enough time planetside. She hoped she didn't show it, because she didn't want to be here any longer than she needed to. Infiltration operations went best when they were quick and dirty.

Just coming down the trail, she saw more than she'd expected. The security team's automatic tents were sophisticated and expensive. This wasn't some low-rent team, but one that obviously came highly recommended.

That made her nervous. She had been right to worry about Verr, the head of security. He clearly had the smarts—and the wherewithal—to break through her information screens. If he had enough time. The key was to make sure he didn't have enough time.

She took in as much information as she could. Roye had surreptitiously recorded the Spires, which were so much more impressive in person than they ever could be on any holographic representation.

The city was remarkably well preserved. Parts still hadn't been uncovered, of course, and might not be for some time. But the way the light reflected off the cleaned buildings suggested this place had been amazing in its day.

It was amazing now.

And it was filled with unrecorded treasures. Things that could be sold for unbelievable prices to collectors and never get recorded as stolen.

If Zeigler was right about the caves—that they had once been a museum for war trophies—then the number of unrecorded treasures would increase exponentially.

The little guide, Chavo, had taken them to a small undecorated house at the edge of the city. Navi got the message. There was nothing here for them to steal. In fact, if they weren't that bright and didn't look around, they might think their house representative—that the ancient Denonites preferred unadorned houses and buildings, that the treasure would be the city itself and not the wares housed within.

She knew better.

The Denonites had spread their style throughout this part of the sector. When they conquered a nation, they'd kept troops onsite until the nation was completely plundered. Sometimes that took decades.

So the Denonites made themselves at home, building houses like this one—on one floor, with one or two bedrooms, a living area, and a nice kitchen. Only every single part of the building had decoration, be it a wall painting or a small flower-decorated cornice or a statue to hide a particularly mundane corner.

Those treasures, in those conquered cities, had been recorded long ago.

It was the heart of the Denonite empire that hadn't been found—until Dr. Gabrielle Reese and her team of scholars stumbled upon the ancient city of Denon itself.

Roye had already made himself at home here. He'd given them both water and some nutrient bars, then slathered oil on his skin. She needed to do the same.

He was studying her as she moved around the house, getting her bearings. Chavo would be back soon to take them to meet Dr. Reese and discuss the job ahead.

Navi hoped Dr. Reese would provide dinner, because the nutrient bars weren't going to hold her for long.

"We can postpone the dive for a day or two," Roye said. "Get our bearings and do this right."

"It's not about the dive," Navi said. "We can't stay here long."

He continued to stare at her. "If we're too tired, we'll make mistakes."

She smiled at him. "The dive'll be safe enough. The suits will protect us."

He shook his head.

"I programmed them with the maps," she said. "The suits'll get us out, even if we're unconscious. Someone will find us. We'll be fine."

"One extra day," he said. "That's all I'm asking."

She thought of that guard's face, the look he had gotten when she mentioned cave diving. Something had happened just behind his eyes, but she wasn't quite sure what it was.

"No," she said. "We dive and then we leave. That's all."

"All right," Roye said, shaking his head. He didn't have to add that he disagreed with her. She already knew.

## 15

**"W**hen were you going to tell me about the caves?"

Gabrielle jumped. She'd thought she was alone in the temple. She was testing her new system, placing items in their designated areas. Then she had gone to the back and cleaned a small elaborate vase. She was just drying off her hands when Meklos interrupted her.

He was standing just outside her work area, hands on his hips, his shirt covered in sweat. His boots had left a mixture of white and red dust on the image of the Spires, dust that glommed together wherever his sweat dripped onto it.

"You're making a mess," she said.

She continued drying her hands so that he couldn't see how they were shaking. She hadn't expected him to confront her about this. She had already told him she was hiring experts. He shouldn't have questioned them. Her word should have been enough.

"Caves," he said. "Tell me about the caves."

She shrugged. "There's not much to tell. They're caves."

"If they're just caves, why did you hire divers?" he asked.

She sighed. She wanted him to feel her exasperation so that he wouldn't ask too many more questions. "Because," she said, "the caves are full of water. I want to see if that water comes from a natural stream or if it is something that will undermine the entire city. That's somewhat important."

"More important than you know," he said, "since caves have branches, and they're not always logical."

"So?" she asked.

"So people can either enter or leave this city through caves. Or haven't you thought of that?"

She didn't like his tone. And, if she were honest with herself, she would have to admit she didn't like him. Hiring the guards had been a mistake. She should have done so long after she knew exactly what kind of treasures she had. And then she should have hired some kind of escort, not someone to guard the city itself.

"They can't get in and out," she said slowly, as if he were a particularly stupid child. "The caves are full of water."

"I would like to see them," he said.

"Well, so would I," she said, "but I'm not qualified to dive them. Are you?"

He glared at her. "Your experts have thin resumes."

He didn't exactly answer her, which she did not appreciate.

"And your resume is a little too thick," she said. "We really don't need this level of security."

He stared at her for a moment. He looked as exasperated as she felt.

"All right," he said finally. "Hire someone else—someone who'll stand where you tell them to and march where you want them to and look the other way when you ask them to. When that group arrives, we'll leave. Okay?"

It was what she wanted. It was what she needed. If she could figure out how, she'd ask him and his team to leave immediately. But she was the one who had conjured up the threat. She was the one who would have to live with this horribly overexperienced security team until someone better arrived.

"Yes," she said. "I think that would be for the best."

## 16

**T**he cavern was unbelievably cold. Navi had noticed that the night before, and thought it simply the contrast between her overheated body and the natural chill any underground area had. But this chill was deeper than that.

It made her relieved she had a space-equipped suit, one that could handle extreme cold with ease. Still, it was the thought of going into the cold, especially when she was so tired from the heat, that made her nervous.

The cavern looked the same as it had the night before. Gabrielle Reese and her assistant had put lights everywhere, making passage down easy. As Navi walked with her equipment, she noted niches in the wall, but she didn't have time to look at them closely.

Neither did Roye. Nor could they show a lot of interest in the niches. Because they were here to see what was in the water, whether there were more caverns and maybe an underground river or, Gabrielle Reese had said disingenuously, "a settlement." She hadn't mentioned a museum or artifacts.

But it seemed to Navi, just from the niches alone, that Zeigler's idea of a museum was a good one. If the niches were manmade—and she guessed from their positions that they were—then they had once held items.

She couldn't get close enough to see if the items were recently removed. There would be markings in the dirt if they were. She and Roye hadn't discussed this much the night before, in case they were overheard. But they did confirm the plan with a sort of shorthand. If they found nothing in the water except more caverns or the source of the water itself, then they would surface in the cavern and report directly to Gabrielle Reese as they (supposedly) were being paid to do. If they found artifacts or evidence of another city, they would go out the passageways and return to the camouflaged ship.

It sounded simple. But the dive happened between those two choices. Now she wished she hadn't been quite so impetuous. Now she wished she had hired someone else to go into the murky deep.

The caverns were empty and there were more of them than Meklos realized. Dr. Reese had told him that there were only a few caves—not these vast cathedral like spaces that could house hundreds, maybe thousands, of people.

She wasn't happy that he had come with the divers. But he'd wanted to watch them suit up. He also didn't like the half-empty packs, the way that they glanced at each other, as if confirming some pre-arranged signal.

He hadn't had his team bring diving equipment on this mission, so he couldn't send someone with the divers. He wouldn't be able to monitor them, since the scanning requirements near the Spires were so restrictive.

He was glad he had sent the weekly update from the Command Center. When the Scholars saw that in conjunction with the news that Dr. Reese had let the team go, they would understand why. And maybe they would send someone to supervise Dr. Reese.

It took three crumbling flights of stairs—maybe as old as the Spires—to get to the cavern with the water. The water was a chalky mess of dust and some kind of oil. He wouldn't want to go into it, although he gathered, from Dr. Reese's conversation with the divers, that she had waded into it more than once. He couldn't imagine why. She wouldn't know where to put her feet or what she was stepping on. She also couldn't know if there was a current. Because if this was part of a river, there could be a very strong current, one that might take divers and force them away from the caverns altogether.

He mentioned this to the woman, Salvino. She had nodded, looking a little distracted. The man, Bruget, was the one who answered. "The suits are state of the art. They can keep us alive in adverse conditions for days. By then, we should figure out where we are and how to get out."

"Unless there is only one way out," Meklos said.

"Even then," Bruget said. "A lead, a line . . ."

"Or a small explosive," Salvino said.

"... would get us out."

An explosive. As if Dr. Reese would allow one to go off below the city. Still, Meklos had made his protest—both to them and to Dr. Reese. He had done what he could. They were professionals. Theoretically, they knew what they were getting into.

The water started as a small trickle at the edge of this cavern. If Dr. Reese was right, the water level had been rising for centuries. But, she'd added, no one knew that for certain. For all they knew, the caverns had gotten flooded five hundred years ago and the water was evaporating. The divers were to find the source, if they could. If they couldn't, they were to go all the way to the bottom of the caverns.

Salvino warned that the dives might take days. She promised that they wouldn't stay under more than five hours each, and she recommended someone stay in the cavern at all times.

Dr. Reese's assistant, Yusef Kimber, would wait down here during this first dive. Apparently Dr. Reese didn't want the non-permanent members of her team to even know the caverns were here—people like Chavo or the other students.

That alone made Meklos suspicious.

Normally, watching over a dive was the kind of crappy mindless job given to someone with no status whatsoever.

The divers set down their packs on a flat area not too far from the water's edge. They opened the packs in unison, and removed their suits.

Meklos had watched divers before. Generally they stripped before suiting up, but

these two did not. They slid their suits over their clothing, then with a nod to each other, over their faces. Hands went up, adjusting, twisting, making certain. At one point, both divers stopped and stared at each other. They didn't have helmets. The suits themselves covered their faces, leaving only their eyes visible. As they stared at each other, he realized they were checking their communications equipment.

He wondered if Dr. Reese realized that, and if she did, if she objected to the use of the equipment. He didn't know how far its reach was, but it had to cover a good distance, in case the divers got separated.

He glanced at Dr. Reese. She watched intently, her fingers threaded together. As the divers continued to check their equipment, she twisted her fingers, keeping them locked, but trying to pull them apart at the same time. She was nervous, almost frightened.

Finally, the divers finished. They turned to Meklos and Dr. Reese. The divers were distinguishable now only by height and body shape. The suits themselves matched. The suits looked like a thin silver coating that someone had applied over every centimeter of the divers. They moved easily with the divers.

After a moment, the divers gave Dr. Reese a tiny salute. Then Salvino walked into the water, followed closely by Bruget. It took them only a few steps to disappear.

"Do you have some kind of communicator to stay in touch with them?" Meklos asked.

Dr. Reese shook her head. "We can't use equipment that powerful here," she said. "Although we did compromise and let them bring their emergency beacons. If they get in trouble, we'll know, and we'll know where to find them."

"Then what?" Meklos asked. "We don't have another diver."

"We'll figure it out if it happens," she said. "I doubt that it will."

He shivered, a movement that had nothing to do with the cold. He loathed her calousness, and her blithe assumption that everything would be fine. No one knew what was down there. No one knew what they would encounter. And whenever anyone was in a situation where no one knew what could go wrong, something inevitably did.

"I hope you're insured if something goes wrong here," he said.

She glanced at him.

"I have no idea," she said. Then she smiled. "But I do know that they are."

## 18

**T**he water was cold. Navi couldn't feel it through her suit, but she knew it anyway, and that made her shiver. The whole dive was making her nervous, in a way that she didn't entirely understand.

The final equipment check had worked. The comm was on. She walked down into the submerged cavern, the water rising until it covered her head. The water was chalky, murky, dark, like a lake after someone had disturbed the sediment below. She turned on the suit's dim lights—which Roye called fog lights—and could see a bit better. Then she turned on all of her cameras. She wanted this dive recorded, so she wouldn't have to repeat it. If they found something, she wanted to be able to identify it clearly.

*You back there?* she asked Roye through the comm.

*Right behind you,* he said.

His voice sounded small and mechanical through the suit. She fought the urge to turn toward him.

*Deploy map,* she said.

She hadn't dared give that order above in case they were monitoring the communication. But she doubted they would monitor through the water.

Gabrielle Reese didn't even seem to care about communications. She seemed de-

tached, almost withdrawn. When Roye had brought up the idea of a malfunction, she had shrugged. She really didn't seem to care if they survived or not.

That was one way to run a dig. It didn't matter how many people died, just so long as the artifacts got out. But Navi had checked before she'd even arrived on Amntha. Gabrielle Reese's digs suffered no more deaths than other digs. No more, but no less, either. She always seemed to stay within the average, even though her earlier digs were on worlds much more hostile than this one. The only anomaly in any of the information was that Gabrielle Reese's digs often had deaths later rather than earlier.

Navi could find no reason for that little statistical blip. Although now, as she walked along the bottom of this cavern in the murky darkness, she wondered if it wasn't because Dr. Reese ceased using precautions later in her projects—precautions that were in place early on. Navi turned on her map. It rose in front of her left eye. The map itself was a series of thin outlines, clear so that she could see through them. Except for the red dot that marked where she was standing, she saw no color at all.

*There's a lot of cave to go,* she said.

*But not a lot of cavern,* Roye said. *We explore this area here, and that's about it. If we're going to find anything, it'll be here.*

She turned on the lights above her helmet and in her fingertips. She directed the beams toward the walls. More little niches, but they appeared empty.

She would have to get closer to make sure.

Sediment flowed around her, like snow in a harsh breeze. The water was hard to walk through, but she didn't want to swim. She wasn't sure it would be easier—the water seemed more viscous here than it had on the surface.

*What the hell is this stuff?* she asked.

*Taking a sample now,* he said. *It's got some chemical composition that wasn't present above, but if we want a better reading we're going to need the ship's equipment.*

*Just great,* she said, but she kept walking.

Finally, she reached the wall. Niches stacked on top of each other like cubbyholes. Gingerly she eased her left hand inside, and found nothing. The edges of the niche were waterworn, and the walls themselves seemed furry.

Mold maybe, or some kind of algae. She took a sample of that and placed it in her own kit. Whatever that stuff was, it meant that this part of the cavern had been underwater for a very long time.

*This seems a little weird to be a museum,* Roye said.

*Let's not jump to conclusions,* she said. *We're just getting started.*

Then she shivered again. They were just getting started. They had planned their route the night before: This series of large caverns, then two passageways down, another bigger cave. If they didn't find anything there, they'd use scanning equipment to see if they could find the water's source. And if they didn't find that, then they would work their way back.

She was ready to go back now. She was so tense that she had been grinding her teeth—at least, she thought she had. They ached, even though her jaw didn't.

*You finding anything?* she asked Roye.

*A whole lotta nothing,* he said.

*Me too.* But she dutifully felt and walked and recorded, going over the giant cavern bit by furry bit.

The divers disappeared under the water. Gabrielle watched for several minutes, until the bubbles faded and she couldn't see shadows moving under the surface.



The cold had numbed her hands—she hadn't worn gloves or added protection because she knew she wouldn't be down here long. Besides, she liked to carry the chill to the surface and let the sun burn it off her. She was about to leave when something rustled behind her. She turned.

Meklos was kneeling in front of the divers' packs. He had opened one and was taking the pieces out.

"I thought you'd already inspected those," she said.

"I did," he said. "I wanted to see if they'd added anything."

"You still don't trust them," she said.

"You pay me not to trust anyone."

She shook her head. She was glad he would be gone soon. Who knew that security guards could be so thorough? She watched him take items out—things she couldn't quite identify. And then he stopped as he removed an extra suit.

"You got someone who can use this?" he asked.

She shook her head. She had no idea. He had asked something similar before, and she hadn't known the answer then, either. She wasn't sure why he cared.

"So they have a back-up," she said. "So what?"

"Back-up," he muttered. "Hmmm."

He set the suit aside and continued his search.

"If you don't need me any longer," she said, "I'm heading to the surface where it's warm."

Without waiting for his answer, she walked around him to the stairs. She glanced at Yusef. He was bundled in three extra layers of clothing beneath his heavy coat.

"You'll be all right?" she asked.

He held up a reading pad and pointed to his lunch. "I'm here for the long haul."

She smiled at him. Then she took one last look at the water. It seemed completely undisturbed now, as if there weren't two humans beneath it.

A chill ran down her spine. She certainly wouldn't go down there. But then, she wasn't being paid to.

## 20

Meklos had cleared out the packs, finding nothing he hadn't seen before. He wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for—a small piece of equipment, a tiny receiver, something. But he hadn't found anything except the third suit.

Was it simply a required precaution? Or was a third diver hiding somewhere?

He didn't know enough about professional cave diving to be aware of what the required precautions were. Regular water diving didn't last as long as a cave dive; the suits weren't as sophisticated and weren't meant to last for days should something go wrong.

He picked up the suit and poked it with his finger. It stretched, then embraced his finger, becoming a part of it. He had a hunch puncturing this thing would take a great deal of work. It might be impossible. So it wasn't as fragile as it initially seemed.

If the suit had belonged to Dr. Reese, he would have punctured it and dealt with the consequences. But he didn't want to risk insulting the experts. Besides, they might need that third suit for a reason he hadn't yet thought of. He didn't dare do anything to it, at least until the dive was over.

But he did turn it inside out. Controls were scattered throughout—some on the fingertips, some on the back of the hand. Others ran along the chin. The eye area was clear, but probably had some kind of communications screen. He pressed one of the

control chips along the chin and the eye area lit up. He pressed another and got a temperature readout that ran along the side of the right eye.

Then he pressed a third and the Spires appeared before the left eye, looking just like they did on the floor of the temple. Only on this image the Spires were clear, except for the outlines of the branches and a red dot at the edge of one of the wide areas.

His heart started to pound. He picked up the suit and carried it to the steps. The red dot moved with him. He cursed.

"Everything okay?" Yusef asked.

Meklos almost cursed again. He had forgotten Yusef was here. "Yeah," he said. "I accidentally turned something on. I need to figure out how to shut it off."

"Let me." Yusef had to struggle to stand with all of his layers of clothing.

Meklos pressed the controls again. The Spires disappeared.

"Never mind," he said. "I got it."

"Never seen a suit like that before, huh?" Yusef asked.

"Not like this," Meklos said. "Have you?"

"I try not to do anything that requires I carry my environment with me," Yusef said. "This is as close to an environmental suit as I get." He indicated his coat and boots.

Meklos smiled because he was supposed to. Then he shut off the other parts of the suit, turned it rightside to, and put it back inside the pack. He turned to Yusef. "You sure you don't want one of my team down here too?"

Yusef shrugged. "I'm okay by myself."

"You've established emergency procedures?"

"I have some field medicine training, if needed. Besides, I'm pretty sure they'll be fine. If the caverns below are anything like the caverns up here, there aren't even sharp edges for them to get caught on."

He was as cavalier as his employer. Maybe that was why Yusef and Dr. Reese got along so well.

"I'll be back down before they're due to come up," Meklos said.

"Okay." Yusef sounded like he didn't care. He pressed himself against the wall, getting white residue on the back of his coat. He sank to the floor facing the water, but pulled out his work pad. Meklos shook his head. Maybe he'd send someone down. After he had some time to think. Because he felt mildly stupid already. How could he have missed it? The Spires weren't some artistic design. They were a map. A three-dimensional map of the cave system below the city. But why would there be a map of the caves so visible from the mountaintop?

"You guys ever figure out what the Spires were for?" Meklos asked.

Yusef gave him an annoyed look. Clearly the man wanted to be left alone. "They were never my specialty. I came here for the city."

"But has anyone figured out what they're for? I mean, they're pretty dramatic."

"The whole place is dramatic," Yusef said.

Meklos stared at him. Yusef seemed to realize that he wasn't going to leave until the question got answered.

"And no, no one knows for certain what they are. All that inlay, all that writing, the way they vibrate if you hit them too hard says artwork to me. But I'll leave it to people who are interested. I'd much rather look at a building than some sculpture that people attached to a mountaintop."

He sounded convincing. He sounded irritated.

Meklos nodded. "Thanks," he said. "I was just wondering."

"Yep," Yusef said. "Everyone wonders about this place. Maybe someday we'll have answers."

"Maybe," Meklos said as he mounted the stairs for the surface. *And maybe, he thought, some people already had this place all figured out.*

Nothing in the widest part of the caverns. Navi had steeled herself to come across some statue, a face looming in the murk, maybe, or an arm reaching out to her. But nothing like that happened. She walked through meters and meters of thick water, the white sediment thick and flowing around her as if she were in the middle of a blizzard.

*Creepiest dive I've done in a long time,* Roye said.

*Me, too.*

She had been hoping for artifacts. Maybe they'd gotten moved as the caverns flooded. Maybe she would step into one of the smaller areas and find everything crammed against the walls, moved by the force of the water.

*You don't think this white stuff is from dissolved artifacts, do you?* she asked.

*No,* he said. *Haven't you noticed? The walls flake.*

*I thought that was algae.*

*It is—or something like it—in the niches. But the walls themselves. Touch one. You'll see.*

She was close to an outcropping. She touched its rounded surface gently. As her fingers found the surface, a flurry of white chips entered the water and flowed with it.

*There is some kind of current down here, isn't there?* she asked.

*I'm not sure,* he said. *We could be doing this. I'm not getting readings that suggest any movement other than our disturbing the environment.*

She wasn't either. She just wanted to find something.

She entered the next cavern. It seemed darker than the one before, even though she knew that wasn't possible. No light filtered down here except the lights she and Roye had brought with them. At least the water hadn't gotten any thicker. She glanced at the map. One more large room to go after this one. Then the passageways.

Then she could get out.

This would be her last cave dive. If she ever had to go through a ruse like this again, she would stay on the surface and supervise. They would bring a new cave diver in. She was getting too old and too impatient for this kind of thing. Or maybe the impatience was coming from the lack of treasure. She loved treasure just like everyone else. The only difference was that all she had to do was touch it. Then it was hers forever.

Meklos hadn't realized how cold he had become in that cavern. His hands ached. His nose throbbed. The moment the sunlight hit him, the blood rose in his skin, attempting to warm him. How cold had it been down there? Colder than it should have been, even in an underground chamber. He wondered what caused that.

Those caverns were important in a way he couldn't understand. And if Yusef's comments were to be believed, Dr. Reese and her team didn't understand, either. They didn't even realize that the Spires were a map.

Meklos moved away from the building that housed the entrance to the caverns. He stepped into an open area and looked up. He had been right. The image he had seen in that suit was the Spires, with a dot indicating where he was. A map.

And his little cave divers, the experts who supposedly knew nothing about this dig, had known about that.

What else did they know?

He really should go to Dr. Reese and tell her that her experts knew more about this place than she did, but he wasn't going to—at least not yet.

The walk across the city of Denon took longer than he'd expected it to. He didn't walk along the main roads, but stayed in the backs of buildings.

Not everything was excavated. He had to go around mounds of reddish brown dirt, some of which had reattached itself to nearby white buildings. Only the larger buildings had been completely uncovered. The smaller ones were still half buried. He hadn't realized that before. He'd never done a thorough walk-through of the city. He'd been too busy setting up defensive parameters and trying to find out exactly what Dr. Reese wanted, and then worrying about these so-called experts. He hadn't had time to do some of the most important work at this job. But he had had a chance to examine the building where they housed the cave divers. He hadn't come at it from this angle before—he'd come at it from the front, off the main road, which was where it was situated.

Coming from the back and side, he realized that half the buildings behind it weren't fully excavated. Their basic shape had been dug out, and many had been excavated down to the foundation on one side only—usually the side that faced the main street.

Someone could have—and probably had—gone inside, looked around, and then gone back out. But dirt remained on the walls, and seemed to fill the back areas.

Oddly enough, however, the roofs on all of the buildings had been cleaned off. They were that same pristine white as the excavated parts of the city. He didn't think about the reasons for that—although he did know the effect. It maximized the light and the reflections.

This place was already overly bright. Clearing the roofs of all the buildings made it even brighter. He ducked inside the building that had housed the cave divers and had to blink at the darkness. Even now, his eyes had trouble adjusting to the shift in light levels. He had to pause and wait for his eyes to adjust, which annoyed him. If someone wanted to attack him here, all they had to do was wait until he came in from the outside. Fortunately, no one lurked inside. The main room barely looked used, and the air mattresses in the back were pressed against the wall, like beds on a ship, their covers folded and pristine.

The cave divers hadn't left many of their belongings. The clothes they'd worn the day before were hanging off one of two chairs that Dr. Reese had provided. A few personal items were scattered on the only table.

A secondary pack, one that had initially been tucked into the other packs, waited near the foot of one of the beds, but had nothing inside.

The emptiness bothered him. The way the couple had described the cave dives had given him the impression that they would be here for several days, taking each dive slowly, especially if they had to look for the water's source. But the building didn't look like someone planned to camp here for several days. It looked like one night's use was all it was going to get.

Maybe these two were former military, and never left things in a mess. Or maybe they hadn't brought a lot because they weren't sure what they would find. But the lack of personal items—here and in the cavern—bothered him.

He carried minimal amounts of equipment when he was doing what he called a "quick and dirty," a job that would require him to go in and come out within twenty-four Earth hours. This looked like a quick and dirty to him, right down to the items left in the building.

If the experts had to leave quickly, they could abandon the things they had here with no consequences at all. A few items of clothing, some cheap jewelry, nothing that couldn't be easily replaced. Nothing that would be missed.

He shivered now, even though he had gotten warm. What were they planning?

Why were they here? And, most important of all, what did Dr. Reese know, and why hadn't she told him?

## 23

Navi let Roye go into the passageway first. She dreaded it, which surprised her. He had mentioned getting caught or trapped inside the passages before they dove, and now the idea was stuck in her head. Everything seemed stuck in her head. Her teeth ached, and the ache was traveling up her cheekbones into her forehead. She would have a blinding headache before this was through if she didn't stop grinding her teeth together.

Roye's lights reflected off the white walls, coming back toward her like a halo. She dove into that instead of the darkness, swimming for the first time since they'd gone underwater. At least the white sediment had thinned. Now it looked like they were going through actual water, not some kind of snowstorm.

Roye moved slowly ahead of her, his feet kicking just enough to propel him forward. She followed far enough behind that his moving feet wouldn't hit her. She hadn't asked him if this place made him uneasy. She didn't want to admit it to herself. So far they had found nothing. She was beginning to wonder if they would find anything at all.

## 24

Gabrielle wiped the last of the dirt off a tiny vase. The vase was fragile, the glass so thin that a press of her fingers would crack it. Amazing it had survived this long underground. Amazing that digging it up hadn't harmed it in any way.

Amazing that she even held it at all.

She was in the cleaning station at the back of the temple. So far, she was the only one to use this building. Even then, she hadn't brought the most precious items in here, like the statue she had found in the caverns. She didn't want to get into the habit. She knew she would have to allow the others in soon, but she didn't want to. She didn't want the interns and the post-docs and the eager young graduate students to see all of her treasures.

Of course, they wouldn't see *all* of her treasures. Some she would move to her own building, without ever having crossed the threshold here. But even the small vases, insignificant except that they had come from the City of Denon and were a great example of Denonite workmanship, felt like hers.

She could sell this little thing for a small fortune, enough to retire on, and no one would ever know. She could sell the two dozen tiny vases already recovered, replenishing her finances as the years went by, and she would never get caught. Collectors never told. They just enjoyed.

The problem was that she didn't want to retire. She loved the work in the field as much as she loved the treasures.

And she loved having her name attached to a major discovery—a discovery that would forever change not just the field of archeology, but the fields of history and art history. A discovery that might even help the humans in this sector recover the knowledge they had lost.

She held the vase up to the light flowing in from the door. The glass was so fine she could see through it. It was so milky white, so dainty, that she had a hunch it was made from the white dirt that covered the top of the mountain.

As she stared through the vase, a shadow appeared. Someone had come inside. She sighed and set the vase down.

Of course, the person violating her privacy was the stupid head of security, Meklos Verr. Eventually, he would leave her alone. Eventually, he would leave.

"Your experts have made a fascinating discovery," he said.

Her heart leaped. She had been hoping for this, but she hadn't wanted it to come through him. She wanted it to come from Yusef down in the cavern. She carefully set the vase down—she didn't want to break it in her excitement—and stepped off the newly constructed floor. The tips of her shoes touched the edge of the drawing on the temple floor.

But Meklos didn't stand on the drawing, even though on previous occasions he had walked all over it. He stayed at the other end of it, forcing her to walk to him.

She almost didn't. She almost made him come to her.

But she was too excited over the idea of a discovery. She wanted to see it, whatever it was.

"Aren't they early?" she asked. "Was there trouble? Why are they back so soon?"

"They aren't back," he said. "I found out about this by going through their belongings."

The disappointment hit her like a physical blow.

She made sure her tone was cool. "I thought you had already searched the packs."

"I did," he said. "But I hadn't turned on their extra diving suit."

"They have an extra suit?" she asked.

He shrugged. "In case one got damaged, I would suppose. They form to whatever body puts them on."

She nodded. She'd seen suits like that in some of the space vessels she'd traveled on. She had even worn one, since one of the captains on one of her early trips wanted to make certain everyone knew how to put one on.

"So?"

"So," he said, "this one comes fitted with a map."

"A map?" she asked.

"Of the caverns."

"I never gave them a map of the caverns," she said. "We don't have one."

He studied her for a moment, as if he didn't believe her. "Are you sure about that?"

"Why the hell do you think I've sent them below?" she snapped. "It's not because I enjoy spending money. I need to know what's down there, and right now, I don't."

He nodded. The nod was tiny, and she wasn't even sure she was meant to see it. It seemed like a private nod, meant for him alone.

"Well," he said after a moment. "You know part of what's down there."

"Of course I do," she said. "Just like you do. We've been in the dry caverns—"

"No," he said. "You're standing on it."

She frowned, then looked down. She was standing on the reproduction of the Spires of Denon.

"What are you saying?"

He crouched and put his finger alongside one of the curves. "When I turned on the suit, this appeared. Only it was in outline only and three dimensional, like the Spires are above. And it had one added feature."

She walked toward him so that she could see what he was doing.

"Right here," he said, "was a small red dot. Right here."

One of the widest points of the Spires.

"When I moved the suit," he said, "the dot moved."

Like a directional device.

"It fits." With his finger, he traced the bottom part of the Spires. The drawing was



wider here than at any other point. The circles crowded in on each other and eventually were separated by branches. Passageways.

"If you overlay the map you have of the existing caves, you'll see that they're identical to this drawing," he said.

"That's not possible," she said. But she didn't mean that it was impossible for this map to exist. She was surprised, yes, but not that surprised.

"It's possible," he said, somewhat defensively.

"No, no," she said. "That's not what I meant."

Then she realized she couldn't explain what she meant. She meant it was impossible for a lowly security guard, no matter how inflated his opinion was of himself, to make a discovery she had missed.

"What did you mean then?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I meant," she lied, "I wonder how they knew."

## 25

The next cavern was obviously smaller. Navi could see that from the passageway. Roye's light hit the walls, the ceiling, and the floor all at the same time, showing the entire cavern.

She could even see the passageway beyond.

The floor held nothing, so far as she could tell. There were niches, just like there'd been in the other caverns, but if she were a betting woman, she would bet they were empty.

Still, she would have to check them out.

Roye had moved toward one wall. She kicked slightly to propel herself forward and veered a little to the left. She grabbed the edge of the passageway's opening with one covered hand, planning to use the wall to push herself into the cavern. Instead a thrumming echoed through her head. Her hand shook off the wall, and the violence of it sent her tumbling backward. Her entire body felt like it was being vibrated apart.

On one of her spins, she saw Roye, bent in half, his hands over his ears, even though the suit covered them.

*What the hell?* she said, but doubted Roye could hear her.

He shook his head—maybe he had heard her—and then looked toward her. Sediment was filling the water. Sediment—and something else—something coming out of the top of the passageway door.

## 26

Sirens went off—and just as Meklos was going to ask what was causing the sound (and why had Dr. Reese had set up such a system, since they were worried about the vibrations destroying the Spires)—light flared.

Reflexively, he covered his eyes, and then he forced himself to open them.

A small line on the Spires drawing near his feet was glowing, the light so bright that he had to blink to keep the tears out of his eyes.

He looked up and saw that the ceiling of the temple had become porous, and through it, he thought he saw a similar light on the Spires themselves.

"Make it stop!" Dr. Reese shouted. "You'll ruin the Spires."

Her shout sounded like a whisper. He didn't want to answer her—it would take more effort than she deserved. Instead, he ran outside. The light seemed worse than it had a moment ago, as if the sun had become even brighter. He shielded his eyes

and made himself look up. Sure enough, one small part of the Spires was glowing, sending light down to the temple, to the map that the Denonites had built in the temple floor.

He couldn't see the Spires clearly enough from below, not clearly enough to understand what he was looking at, so he went back inside the temple.

The single line glowed and so did one of the circles beyond. It wasn't very far from the first caverns that the divers would have gone into underwater. A series of caverns, and then a passageway, and then another cavern. The passageway and the cavern had lit up.

"My God," Meklos said. "It's not artwork at all."

"What?" Dr. Reese had somehow managed to join him. Her eyes were small pinpoints of blackness in her pale face. "What's not art?"

"The Spires," he said. "They're not art or a map or anything like that. They're a defense system."

27

A barrier descended from the top of the passageway door. The barrier was milk-colored and opaque, like the water, and it came down with great force.

Navi thought it should have shattered as it hit the ground. Then she realized that had her hand been in the way, the sharp bottom of that barrier would have sliced it off.

She whirled, not wanting to be trapped in the passageway. But nothing had come down behind her. She looked up, and the ceiling of the passage looked fine. She was disturbing the water, making the sediment rise around her, but otherwise she was fine.

The vibrating had stopped. All the shaking and thrumming and violence had ended when the barrier had connected with the bottom of the passage.

*Roye?* She sent to him. *Roye?*

She could see him through the barrier. He looked a little smaller than he was. He had swum to the barrier between them.

He tapped his head—he couldn't hear her or communicate with her. He had to be trying, just like she was.

They both grabbed the sides of the passageway, just like she had before, feeling for something, anything, that would make the barrier rise again. Only she hadn't pressed her hands flat against anything. She had grabbed the curve in the doorway, the wall itself, separating the passage from the cavern. She had activated something. And now she had to shut it off.

She held up a finger, then swam back to the caverns they had explored before. The first cavern looked no different, except that there might have been more sediment floating in the water.

She had to force herself to breathe slowly, to calm herself, so that she didn't swim through the caverns and out. She swam back into the passageway, even though it made her cringe.

Roye was still trying to figure out how to open the damn thing. He didn't look panicked, not like she felt. But how could she tell? She could only see his eyes through the clear part of his suit and even that was through this weird milky barrier.

She resumed touching the sides as well. If only she could remember exactly where she had put her hand, she might be able to touch the edge of whatever it was. Her heart was racing and she was breathing too rapidly. Her suit would shut her down soon if she weren't careful. It would start regulating her air.

She concentrated on touching the wall. One hand overlapping the other, moving slowly. Moving deliberately. Trying to find a way to get Roye out.

**T**he sirens stopped. Meklos's ears rang.

He looked down. The light remained, the line glowing, the cavern glowing, and a smaller blackish silvery light threading out of the little area between them.

"Did we have a groundquake?" Dr. Reese asked.

He frowned. He hadn't noticed, with the light and the sound and the Spires glowing above them.

"Was that real vibration or was it caused by the sound?" she asked.

Her words still sounded tinny and far away. Those sirens had been loud. He looked up. The ceiling was still porous. The light was still flowing down, and he could almost see that silvery blackness in the center of it.

She shook her head at him in exasperation, then staggered away, toward the back. He had a hunch she was talking, but he had no idea what she was saying. He didn't care. If this was some kind of defense system, then the divers had set it off. And if they had set it off, then they were in trouble. He left the temple at a full run.

**T**he little vase had shattered. It had vibrated off her worktable and landed on the newly installed floor. Gabrielle knelt, removing tiny slivers of glass, her heart aching.

If she had left the vase in the niche near the door of the house she had chosen to live in, the vase would be fine now. It wouldn't have fallen. It wouldn't have broken. All those centuries, only to have her carelessness destroy it.

But, as she held the larger shards in the palm of her hand, she realized she could test it now. She could see if the glass had truly been made from the white dirt near the Spires.

The Spires. What had Meklos said? That they were a defense system? Which meant that they made that noise. Impossible.

She cupped the shards in her hand, grabbed a small box that still remained on her worktable, and poured the shards into the box. Then she used a cloth to gently wipe off her palm. Her ears rang. Maybe the fall hadn't broken the vase. Maybe the sound had shattered it. Just like it would have shattered the Spires. Her breath caught. She set the cloth down. Shattered the Spires and sent them tumbling to the ground, causing the quake.

She was probably lucky nothing had hit the temple. Even though she really didn't recognize this place with the debris on the floor, the light emanating from one small part of the painting, and the open ceiling, which was letting the light through. She had been in a panic and now she wasn't. Now she was thinking clearly. She made herself walk out of the temple, avoiding the artwork on the floor just because it made her nervous. The whole thing made her nervous. She had never experienced anything like this, not in all her years as an archeologist and leader of expeditions.

The sunlight blinded her. She blinked away tears, then wiped her eyes. Finally she looked at the area around her. Even after the quake, it looked the same. Nothing had fallen here. Nothing had broken. She expected to see bits of the Spires all over the city, crushing buildings, ruining all her hard work. But she saw nothing different, except a small amount of dust floating in the air, as if it had been dislodged from the dust piles.

She steeled herself, straightening her shoulders, stiffening her back. Then she looked up. The Spires were so bright that they hurt her eyes. Light flowed from them to the temple itself.

But the Spires hadn't crumbled. They hadn't fallen apart. All that worry about sound and vibration and powerful equipment had been completely wrong. The Spires were sturdy. They were sending light to the temple, through the open ceiling, and onto that little two-dimensional drawing on the floor. White light threaded with black. Like the drawing. Meklos had said it was a map. And if it was a map, then something had just triggered it. Something had turned it on. The light had appeared in the area where the divers were. She cursed.

How was she supposed to deal with the fact that the security guard—a lowly security guard—had seen something she and her team had missed for years?

She shook her head. She couldn't think about that now. She needed to figure out what to do next.

30

Roye had brought a scanner. He held it up against the barrier. The scanner was small, barely the size of his fingers, and if Navi hadn't known what it was, she wouldn't have recognized it. He ran it along the edge of the barrier.

She hadn't brought any equipment, not like that. She had believed Dr. Reese's experts—that this environment was incredibly fragile, and needed protection from all sorts of equipment. If this place was so delicate, then it should have fallen apart from the vibration as the barrier came down. It hadn't. Still, she was here with only her suit's sensors. They would have to do. She opened the palm of her right hand and surveyed the wall holding the barrier in place. Equipment yes, but no controls. The controls, so far as her small scanner could tell, had to be somewhere else.

She methodically moved her hand along the edge, searching for some kind of device, any kind, to release the barrier.

After all, she had triggered it from here. She had to be able to release it from here as well.

Roye ran his scan along his side. He finished before she did, then started all over again.

When she was finally done, she looked at him through the barrier. His face was distorted by the water and the glass-like material. His eyes looked too big in their clear protective area. He shook his head. So did she. What had she triggered? She put her palm on the side again and this time got a small hit.

This part of the wall was touch-sensitive. She had triggered something, but nothing in the wall itself. The touch system had sent a signal elsewhere and that signal told the system to lower the barrier. Then she frowned. Slowly she raised her hand to her mouth. Her teeth didn't ache any more. Neither did her head. She had been feeling some kind of energy field. Either the barrier had cut the field off, or the field had shut off when she touched the wall. She couldn't remember when her teeth stopped aching. It was hard to notice an absence of pain.

She tapped the barrier. Roye looked at her, startled. She put a finger to her cheek and hoped he could understand what she meant since he could no longer hear her. She couldn't mouth anything at him, and she couldn't point to her own teeth.

She tapped her cheek again, then held out her hands in a question.

He stared at her for a moment, then he seemed to understand. He ran a hand along his chin, then stopped. He shook his head. Then he shrugged.

She wasn't sure what that meant. Was the pain still there? Or was it gone? She shrugged.

He made a circle with his fist. Zero. He didn't feel anything. Neither did she. She nodded.

So the barrier hadn't broken the field, leaving it working on his side and off on hers. The field had just gone away. Maybe she hadn't triggered it when she'd touched the wall. Maybe Roye had when he swam through the opening.

Or maybe the only part of the field that still worked was the wall area. The water might have damaged the rest.

She pointed at her finger, as if she held the small scanner he'd brought. It took him a moment, but he finally held it up.

She nodded. Then she pointed behind him.

It took a few more gestures before he realized that she wanted him to scan the passages behind him, see if there were more barriers. He held up a finger and swam away from her.

The water swirled where he had been. There was definitely more sediment in it now, and that intrigued her. It meant something, although she wasn't sure what.

She waited, holding her breath until she realized what she was doing. When she finally released it, she saw him swimming back toward her. He was nodding. It looked like his eyes were crinkling in the corners. Did that mean he was grinning? He mimed swimming, then pointed behind him. Then he pointed behind her. She nodded.

They were each going to swim away from the barrier. Obviously as far as he could scan, there were no detectable barriers. She doubted there were any on her side either.

But if there were, she would wait near one of them for him to come get her. Because once they got out of this godforsaken underground lair, they'd communicate with each other, Spires be damned. And then they'd get the hell out of here.

He waved at her. She waved back. Then he whirled and swam away from the barrier. After a moment, she did the same thing, swimming back the way they had come.

### 31

Meklos went down the ancient steps five at a time, until he slipped and had to catch himself with a hand on the ice-cold wall. The steps were covered with white dust, which was as slick as water.

He made his way down the remaining steps carefully until he reached the cavern where Yusef was waiting for the divers to return. For a moment, Meklos didn't see Yusef. He didn't see the packs either, and thought he was in the wrong place. Then he realized they were all covered in dust.

He hurried across the floor. Yusef leaned against the wall, his heavy coat white, his face so dust-covered it looked like it was coated in ice.

"You all right?" Meklos asked.

Yusef opened his eyes. He focused on Meklos and then his eyes filled with tears.

"My ears," Yusef said too loudly. He reached toward them with his uncovered hand. The fingertips were black. Why wasn't he wearing gloves?

Meklos turned Yusef's head. Blood had oozed out of his ears and frozen onto the side of his head. His fingertips were probably not frostbitten; they were covered in blood.

"Can't stand," Yusef said, again speaking much too loud. "I'm so dizzy."

The siren must have been particularly loud in here. Whether the cavern was the source or whether the sound had just echoed off the enclosed space—and the water—Meklos didn't know. "I'll get you out," Meklos said.

He didn't want to. He wanted to make sure the divers were all right. But he had to take care of this man first.

"Can you stand?" Meklos asked.

Yusef put a finger up toward his ear again. "I can't hear you."

His eardrums must have ruptured. Meklos didn't even want to think about that kind of pain.

"Can you stand?" Meklos asked slowly, making sure his mouth formed each word carefully.

"I think so," Yusef said. He struggled to his feet, using the wall to brace himself.

Meklos slipped his arm around Yusef's back and half-carried him toward the stairs. The slippery stairs. This would take longer than he wanted it to. But he had to do it. Then he would come back for the divers. If it wasn't too late.

32

Navi swam into the larger cavern, happy to be out of the passageways. She didn't try to walk this time. She wasn't moving slowly. She was swimming as hard as she could.

The cavern looked bigger than it had on the way in, but that was probably because Roye wasn't with her. His presence had put the place into perspective, giving her something to concentrate on besides the snowy water and the curving walls.

She had nothing to concentrate on now except getting the hell out of here.

She slowed as she reached the first archway and gingerly extended her hand toward it.

They had both touched the walls in here, looking for niches or anything that could be valuable, and they hadn't set anything off. So either that other cavern had been more valuable or the barriers didn't exist this far in.

She made herself concentrate on her fingers, reaching, reaching—

—and finding nothing. They slipped into the next cavern, just like they had on the way in.

She swam through, her heart pounding.

Why have barriers on that side? Why not here?

She couldn't figure it out.

But it kept her brain busy while she swam to the next cavern.

It kept her busy while she did her best to get out.

33

"We have to figure out how to shut this off," Gabrielle said. She was standing on the temple steps. Most of her team had gathered here, apparently looking for instruction.

If they wanted instruction, she'd give it to them.

She waved her hand at the wave of light. "This thing could be dangerous."

The light bath that she enjoyed every day hadn't been a brighter moment in the sun. The system had run some kind of program, one she'd been too stupid to understand.

She'd never been inside the temple when it ran. She had always come outside to bathe in the light.

If she had been inside, would she have seen that the temple's ceiling grew clear, and the light illuminated parts of the drawing below? She had no idea, and she couldn't think about it now.

"There's a silvery black thread running through the light," she said. "I don't like it. I've never seen it before."

She didn't tell them that the light illuminated the drawing inside or that the



drawing was really a map. Nor did she tell them Meklos's theory that the entire thing—the Spires, the map, the temple—was some kind of defense system.

"I'm convinced, though," she said, "that this is all manmade. If there's a way to turn it on—and something clearly did—then there's a way to turn it off. We have to find it."

"The light is focused on the temple," said one of the graduate students. "Does that mean the controls are inside?"

*How am I supposed to know, you ass?* she nearly snapped, but she caught herself just in time.

"Maybe," she said. "Or maybe there's something near the Spires. Spread out and look. Those of you with engineering experience, look around here first. Use scanners and communicators. If the Spires can survive that loud siren, they can survive anything."

She hoped. It was all a guess now. And so far, at least when it came to the Spires of Denon, all of her previous guesses had been wrong.

### 34

**B**y the time they reached the ground floor of the building that hid the cavern's entrance, Meklos was carrying Yusef. The man had fainted halfway up, which was probably a blessing.

Meklos carried him through the door and into the street. Several members of Dr. Reese's team were running by.

"Hey! Hey!" he shouted. "I need help here."

Chavo stopped. So did two others.

"He needs a doctor," Meklos said. "Get him to the doctor. And send my people here. They need to go to the caves."

"Caves?" Chavo asked.

So Dr. Reese hadn't told the rest of her team.

"Caves," Meklos said. "Through this door is an entrance leading down. I need at least three of my people, preferably the ones who can dive."

"Dive?" Chavo asked.

"Just tell Phin that," Meklos said, realizing he had no time to explain. "He'll understand."

Meklos passed Yusef off to two of the students, then ran back into the building. He heard steps behind him, turned, and saw Chavo.

"I gave you instructions," Meklos snapped.

"I just didn't believe it. Do you think the controls are in here?"

"What controls?" Meklos asked.

"For the light," Chavo said.

"I don't care," Meklos said. "Go get Phin. I need help here—experienced help—and I need it now. You got that? You can search for whatever it is you're searching for after you get me some assistance."

"Yes, sir," Chavo said and sprinted for the door.

Meklos was halfway down the stairs before he realized what Chavo was talking about. The controls for the defense system. Dr. Reese must have sent them in search of the controls.

Stupid woman. Didn't she realize that a group of dirt scientists wouldn't know anything about ancient technology?

If they found controls, they might make things worse. But he kept going down into the cold. He needed to get those divers out before the archeologists screwed things up again.

Finally, Navi's head rose above the water. She let out a relieved breath and almost removed her suit, then remembered how cold this cavern was.

It was completely empty. She'd thought Gabrielle Reese had left someone to watch for them, but no one was in the cavern. And their packs were gone.

She swam until she had to walk, and then she hurried out of the water, her breath coming in small gasps. As she got closer to the water's edge, she scanned the cavern.

It looked like the one she had left, but she wasn't sure. Caverns could look alike down here, with their niches and their archways—

And the stairs.

Not only were there stairs, but the stairs had footprints. She made her gaze follow the footprints until she saw a huge disturbance in the cavern floor. It was right next to the wall, near where the water ended.

Someone had been sitting there, and someone else had come down. One set of footprints came down, and two went up, although one seemed like that person dragged their feet.

The fact she could see prints registered for the first time. The water wasn't the only thing filled with more sediment. The walls had flaked, and the flaking had been severe.

The flakes had fallen throughout the cavern like snow.

Which meant that this had happened before. Because of the sediment in the water. That had come from somewhere before the barrier came down.

She stepped out of the water and searched for her pack. It had to be here. It was probably just covered in sediment.

The sediment clung to her feet and legs, coating her in white. As she disturbed it, more and more covered her. Then she heard something from above.

She looked up. A man came down the stairs, sideways, holding the wall. The man's head suddenly came into view. It was Meklos Verr, the head of security. The competent one.

She let out the breath she was holding, relieved.

"Oh, thank god," she said, and realized her voice was muffled by the suit. She pulled it off her face.

The air wasn't just cold.

It was frigid.

"Where's your partner?" Meklos said. "Is he all right?"

"I think so," she said. "We'll know soon enough."

"What does that mean?" He finally reached the bottom part of the cavern. "Is he behind you?"

"No," she said, then glanced at the water.

"Then where is he?"

If she told Meklos, she would have to tell him about the map. She would have to explain her scans. She would probably have to admit who she was. She glanced at the stairs.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"At the moment. I sent for reinforcements. Some members of my team have water diving experience. I was going to use your extra suit."

Something passed across his face then. His expression sharpened for just a moment.

"The suit," he said, "adjusts to the wearer, doesn't it?"

She nodded.

"And you can stay underwater for a very long time," he said.

"It's designed for that," she said.

"So you and one of my team can get him."

She shook her head. "We probably won't have to."

She hoped they wouldn't have to. She never wanted to go into that water again.

"You triggered something down there," he said.

"A barrier. Roye was on one side, and I was on the other."

"So he went out the passageway to the ship you have waiting."

She blinked at him, not sure if she had heard him correctly.

"I found your map," he said. "How did you get that?"

She had heard him right. This day was full of surprises.

"He'll contact me when he gets out," she said, choosing not to answer Meklos's question. "I'm not sure how long to wait."

"What were you planning to do? Rob the lower caverns? Take all the loot and fly it out of here without any of us being wiser?" He took a step toward her. "What even made you think there's something down in those caverns?"

"There's nothing in those caverns," she said.

"You know that now," he said. "But you thought something was down there before."

"I did," she said. "I was told this might be a museum. For the Denonites. They would have used it for all the spoils of the various wars they fought."

"And you came to rob it," Meklos said.

"I came to save it," she said.

He glared at her. "Really?"

"Really," she said.

"How did you plan to do that?" he asked.

She took a deep breath. She was going to have to trust him. "By getting enough evidence to arrest Dr. Gabrielle Reese."

### 36

**A** light was moving along the interior lines of the Spires. Gabrielle had gone inside the temple to watch. Looking up at the Spires hurt her eyes, but in here, in the dimness, she could watch the light move.

It moved as if someone were shining a light source on a particular area. Then, once that area received a thorough examination, the source moved to the next area.

If she hadn't learned long ago that there were no light sources underneath the drawing of the Spires (at least none that she recognized), she would have thought someone was playing with lights underneath the floor. The movement unnerved her. The way everything had changed in just the past hour had unnerved her.

Her staff crowded parts of the temple. They were using scanners and talking loudly. Before people had spoken in hushed tones here. Now the voices were raised, excited, the way people talked when they were panicked and thrilled at the same time. Her team thought this new development interesting. It worried her.

Not just because it could be dangerous. Hell, it *was* dangerous. She had seen Yusef as the staff carried him to their doctor. He was so pale she thought he had died. Blood blackened both of his ears, and his lips were blue. Something had happened in that cavern. Chavo ventured a guess that the sound was magnified down there. But she wasn't so sure. She wasn't sure about anything. She wasn't even sure why that light was moving.

The only thing she could tell was that it was heading away from the caverns. And she couldn't figure out why that would happen, either.

She rubbed her hands over her upper arms, feeling the gooseflesh along her skin. In all her years digging and searching, finding ancient burial sites, ancient *treasure*, she had never experienced anything like this. And she never wanted to experience anything like it again.

“Arrest Doctor Reese?” Meklos couldn’t keep the shock from his voice. He’d researched Dr. Reese before taking this job. Even though she wasn’t yet fifty, she had discovered several important sites, including this one. She’d made large contributions to the fields of archeology, art history, and general history in this sector.

Granted, she was a loner and not always liked by her crews, but that hadn’t bothered him. Most people in positions of power weren’t liked. Although he hadn’t liked her either, partly because of her attitude and partly because she had hidden information from him. Like these caves.

“Yes, we were looking for reasons to arrest her.” Salvino had found the packs. She picked one up, making the sediment float around her like a dust storm. Some of the whiteness adhered to her right thigh, her belly, and her lower arm.

Then she let the pack fall. She opened her suit and slowly pulled it off, sliding it off her right arm and hand first, and then going to her left. Meklos was torn between two questions. He wanted more information on Dr. Reese and this startling announcement.

But, over the years, he had learned that startling announcements were often diversionary tactics, to make a questioner forget his line of questioning. He had asked Salvino if she was going to steal the artifacts from this area, just before she had said she was going to prevent a robbery. She hadn’t answered his first question. So he decided against pursuing that tack and went for the other.

“I checked you out,” he said, not adding that he had done it as best he could in a limited amount of time. “You’re a cave diver, not a police officer.”

“Technically, I’m neither.” Salvino stepped out of the suit. It crumpled against the ground. The water dripping off it made a little trail back to the pool.

Then she opened her pack. She slid her hand inside, grasped a seam, and peeled it back.

Meklos cursed. How had he missed that? Not once, but twice.

She glanced at him. “You couldn’t have found it without very specialized equipment,” she said as if she were reading his thoughts. “It’s keyed to my DNA, and my DNA only. That’s why I wasn’t worried about leaving the pack behind. You’d never find this pouch and if you miraculously did, you’d never open it.”

He pressed his lips together. He didn’t believe in never. He would have gotten it open, eventually.

She slipped her hand into the pouch and pulled something out. It was some kind of data on a drive as thin as a fingernail. She handed it to him, but he didn’t have a scanner on him.

“What this will tell you,” she said, “is that I’m Navi Salvino of the Interagency Arts and Monuments Protection League. We’re a squad of investigators authorized by various governments, including the Unified Governments of Amnthra, to protect historic sites and properties throughout the sector. If we do find a problem, we turn that problem over to the enforcement arm best equipped to handle it.”

He slipped the small dataport into a pocket of his shirt and sealed the pocket. He’d heard of the Interagency Arts and Monuments Protection League mostly by its acronym IAMPL. In the last decade, they’d stopped some spectacular thefts through-

out the sector. But that didn't mean she was a legitimate part of the organization. Only that she had heard of it, along with everyone else in the sector.

"Dr. Reese has a fantastic reputation," Meklos said.

"I'm sure you noted that when you decided to take this job," Salvino said. "You probably also noted that she had a significant amount of money in various accounts."

He had. He hadn't thought much of it. She was an in-demand expert in her field, a woman who commanded high prices for almost anything she did.

"That wasn't my concern."

"It was ours." Salvino pulled the thin heating blanket from her pack. She flapped the blanket open, then wrapped it around herself. "No matter how well known they are, people in Dr. Reese's position don't make a great deal of money. Everything they do is paid for. The Scholars funded this expedition, and will continue to fund it for all the years of its lifetime. They funded her previous expeditions as well."

"So?" Meklos was getting cold. He'd run around a great deal since the sirens went off, sweating through his clothes. Now the clammy material was starting to freeze. "That proves nothing."

"In and of itself, you're right," Salvino pushed her hair out of her face. Her hand was trembling. "But we also found a lot of small items with dubious provenance that we could later trace back to her earlier digs. At some point, she takes items from her sites and sends them through a series of dealers. She sells these small items to private buyers for a great deal of money."

"I don't know how she could," Meklos said. "This dig is well known."

But as he spoke, he understood. The dig was well known, but the location of the so-called museum wasn't. If the caverns were as billed, then Dr. Reese could have taken items from here before they were ever recorded. They would have been deemed lost, if their existence was even known.

She hadn't told him about the caverns. She didn't want her assistants down here. From Chavo's reaction, he hadn't known about the cavern, either.

She had been keeping secrets.

Too many of them.

"You're beginning to understand," Salvino said.

"Or you're lying to me to cover up your own plan."

She sighed. "My plan was simple. I wanted to get into this dig to see if there were valuables to loot. The cave diving was a gift. Then we were able to map the caverns, and—"

"How did you map the caverns?" he asked. "Dr. Reese didn't."

"Dr. Reese was afraid of her site," Salvino said. "She didn't want to use equipment because of the Spires."

"You believe that?" he asked. It could have been a good excuse to keep everyone else from finding the caverns below.

"Yes, I believe that," Salvino said. She picked up her suit, folded it, and shoved it into her pack. "All the scientists worried that the Spires were too fragile to handle much of anything."

He had seen that in some of his research.

"We decided to try scanning from the ground, just outside the secure zone. But we were looking for the caverns." Salvino picked up the other pack. The blanket started to slide off her shoulders. "No one else ever did."

Meklos put the blanket around her, then took both packs. "How did you know about the caverns?" he asked.

"We didn't. But when I realized we were going to see the Spires, I hired an expert, a man by the name of Zeigler—"

"I've heard of him," Meklos said.

She gave Meklos a measuring look. "Then you know why I trusted his instinct. It turned out to be right."

Meklos nodded. He would check Salvino out, but her explanations made a lot of sense.

"Lying about your cave diving experience could have killed you," he said.

She shook her head. "Nothing in my information packet was a lie. I've dived a lot, mostly on jobs like this. You'd be surprised how many ancient cities are flooded."

"Nothing was a lie," he repeated. "But you left out a lot."

"I erased everything that was important, figuring no one would bother to check. I was right."

His cheeks warmed. "I checked," he said. "But the equipment here—"

"Worked to my advantage," she said. Her teeth were chattering.

"What's your plan now?" he asked. "Go to the surface and arrest Dr. Reese?"

"No," Salvino said. "There's no reason. The caverns are empty."

"So you say," Meklos said. "There's no way to check. For all I know, your companion is taking valuables out now."

"I'll let you check our ship," she said. "You can examine everything we have."

He gave her a measuring look. She seemed truthful, but he had no real way to know. Although deep down, he trusted her. And he had never trusted Dr. Reese.

38

As they climbed the stairs, Meklos explained what had happened above ground to Navi. He explained his defense system theory.

It made sense. It made her disappointment fade.

She had wanted to see the museum. But that didn't exist—or no longer existed, at least not here. The defense system was almost as good, maybe better, since it probably had applications in the modern era.

And it would prevent Gabrielle Reese from robbing this place blind. Because she wouldn't be in charge any longer.

The Scholars got most of their funding from government grants from all over the sector. Various governments would want to know how this defense system worked. They'd bid for the rights to study it.

This entire place would become famous. Dr. Reese wouldn't have untrammelled access any longer. They had nearly reached the top of the stairs when Navi put her hand on Meklos's arm.

"Check me out," she said. "As soon as we get to the surface. If what you say is true, then you can use proper communications equipment right from the city and it won't cause any harm. With a more powerful system, you'll see my bio, even without the disk I gave you. You'll find it all."

He stopped beside her, moving the packs to one hand. "Why should I do that?"

"Because we're going to hire you. You'll guard this place for us until we can bring in reinforcements and take control from Dr. Reese."

"She found this place. By your own admission, she hasn't done anything," he said. "You were right. There is no reason to take her off the dig."

Navi smiled. "I'm glad you understand. She truly is a gifted expert in her field. She should be allowed to stay. But you need to make sure everything else stays as well."

He grunted, which she took as an assent. Although she wasn't sure.

She climbed the remaining steps into the building. People combed the walls, scanning everything. The site looked completely different than it had in the morning.

"Are there really caves down there?" one of the graduate students asked her.



The kid was so excited he apparently didn't notice the white all over her clothing or the blanket around her shoulders. Or the way her teeth were chattering.

"I'm not at liberty to say," Navi said. She let Meklos lead her into the sunshine.

The warm sunshine that seemed to have a life of its own. It undulated like water toward the building that Gabrielle Reese had called the temple.

Clearly it wasn't a temple at all, but some kind of central control station.

"You want to see it?" Meklos asked her.

Navi nodded. She wanted to see it, then she wanted to go back to the building she'd been staying in. She wanted to sit alone in the darkness and shake.

She wanted a few minutes to let the fear ease away before she had to be completely professional again.

### 39

The light was almost to the end of the Spires now. Gabrielle studied the light moving through the two-dimensional drawing as if it were alive and about to attack. A few of her team had gathered around as well, asking questions that she mostly ignored.

Then Meklos came inside. People parted from him as if he were going to harm them. He had a woman with him, and it took Gabrielle a moment to realize it was one of the divers.

"What did you find?" she asked, barely able to control her excitement. The museum? Treasures? She wasn't sure she could hide any of it now, but that mattered less than the fact of the artifacts. She wanted to see the famous Spoils of War Museum that the Denonites had created.

"Nothing," the woman said. She sounded tired.

"It's a long story," Meklos said. Obviously, he already knew what the story was.

Gabrielle glared at him. He was still getting in her way.

But he didn't seem to notice her glare. Instead, he was staring at the drawing.

"This is brilliant," he said to the diver. "This is how the Denonites protected themselves against siege. Those passages below had to have once been easily visible from the ground. The Denonites built this so that they could track anyone entering."

"And prevent them from coming into the city with those barriers," the diver said.

"What barriers?" Gabrielle asked.

But they ignored her. She wasn't used to being ignored.

She was about to ask the question again, when the light moved to the last part of a Spire. It flickered for a moment, and then disappeared. There was a grinding above her. The ceiling closed. The lights were gone.

"What was that?" she asked.

But she didn't expect anyone to answer her, so she hurried outside. The light no longer flowed down from the Spires.

The city looked normal—as normal as it had before the sirens had gone off. The defense system had shut down, but she didn't know why. She was beginning to think she didn't know anything.

She was torn between awe at the system she'd seen and a disconcerting sense of unease, as if life as she had known it had suddenly and irrevocably changed.

### 40

"He got out," Navi said softly. "He got out."  
She felt more relief than she'd expected to.

"I'll give him a few minutes, and then contact the ship."

She looked at Meklos.

"I can't believe he got out."

Meklos smiled. He seemed calmer, too. "He got out and the system shut off. This thing is brilliant. The threat is gone, so the entire system is back in wait mode."

"We're going to be studying this for a long time," Navi said. "Will you help?"

"When everything checks out," Meklos said.

She nodded. She understood that. She took her pack from Meklos, dug into the pouch, and grabbed her communicator. Damn, it was nice to use a powerful system again. She held it up to him. His smile widened.

She walked to the door. Gabrielle Reese was sitting on the stairs outside, looking lost. And she had lost. The woman was smart enough to know that the change in the Spires made the dig something completely different.

Oddly, Navi wanted to comfort her, to tell her that what she would lose financially, she would gain in reputation. Gabrielle Reese would forever be the woman who'd discovered the long-lost technology of the Denonites.

But Navi didn't say that. Instead she stepped into the street, bathing in the warmth of Amnthra's bright sun. She held up her communicator, pressing it on. She didn't use any identifying words. The signal from the comm should have been enough.

"I'm checking on Roye," she said. "Is he all right?"

*He looks like he's made of snow, the pilot of her deep exploration ship answered. But he's all right. Glad to be out of there. You coming to join us?*

She looked over her shoulder. There were too many changes here, too much going on. Much as she trusted Meklos Verr, she had a hunch he didn't trust her. And there was too much at stake to leave to a man she'd just hired.

"No, I'm staying. I'll send up a full report tonight. We're going to need a lot of experts on the spot very fast. And not the kind that we have. We're dealing with technology now, not ancient art."

*Figured out that much, the pilot said. Roye wants to know if you're all right. Does he need to come over the mountain to find you?*

"I'm fine," she said, then she took a deep breath of the warm air.

More than fine. She was thrilled.

Everything had turned out much better than she'd expected.

"Tell him," she said, "I'm just fine."

41

It didn't take Meklos long to check out Navi Salvino, now that he had the proper equipment. He spent most of his time digging through information logs from far away, ones she never would have thought to tamper with.

While he did that, Meklos had his team set up a better perimeter. He put robots and motion detectors all around the rim of the crater, like he'd wanted to do from the beginning.

He was going to accept her offer. He wanted to study the Spires system. It fascinated him. He'd been in countless cities that protected themselves from attack, but not like this place. He wanted to know more.

And he had a hunch there would always be more to know.

He lifted his face toward the Spires. He'd thought them beautiful when he'd first seen them. But now he realized they were more than beautiful. They were fascinating and, more importantly, useful. He smiled at them—and silently promised he would always keep them safe. ○

## WHAT KILLED TOM DISCH?

## THE WORD OF GOD

by Thomas M. Disch

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This is going to be an unavoidably personal essay, since it must deal with two great writers who happen to have been long term friends of mine, one of whom, Thomas M. Disch, recently committed suicide on the heels of, or indeed perhaps as a deliberate part of, the launch of his last novel, if novel it can be said to be, *The Word of God*, in which he trashes the memory of the other, Philip K. Dick.

Believe me, I didn't want to have to write this, I thought I would just review *The Word of God* along with several other books in the same column, and leave it at that. But in the end, I realized I just couldn't shirk this arduous and painful task because it simply has to be written, and the karma of it is that like it or not, and I really don't, no one that I know of is in a position to write it but me.

Tom and his "significant other" Charles Naylor, and I and my "significant other" Dona Sadock, had a four-way friendship, a friendship of couples, not the most common of friendships, going back three decades. And Tom's "significant other," or "partner" or whatever other awkward terms will have to suffice for lovers living together until someone invents a good non-gender specific-term in English, equivalent to the French "compagnon" is a significant part of this story and of *The Word of God*, since the not-that-less-recent death of Charlie Naylor played a major part in Tom's apparently carefully planned decision to end his life.

This I know for certain because the last time I spoke with Tom he told me so.

He also talked about suicide, and not

in a jocular manner. At the time, I didn't quite realize that it was imminent, but I did realize he was speaking seriously enough to discuss it seriously with him in an effort to dissuade him.

Though in the end, in retrospect, by my lights, and certainly by his own, Thomas M. Disch had rational reasons for choosing to write *The Word of God* as his not-so-fond farewell to the literary world, to the world of science fiction, and to choose its launching as the time to shuffle and soft-shoe his way off this mortal coil. If you've got good reasons to do it, and you're going to do it, do it with style and class, and with a juicy finger pointed skyward.

Though on the other hand . . .

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. Just as I had somehow felt it would be getting ahead of things to read *The Word of God* before going to see Tom read from it at an event at New York's South Seaport Museum. And upon reading it after the event, I was glad that I hadn't. . . .

Though on the other hand . . .

*The New York Review of Science Fiction* sponsors a monthly series of readings by science fiction and fantasy authors at the Seaport Museum in New York. I have done readings there several times—I hadn't seen Tom for years, hadn't even spoken to him since Charlie's death and neither had Dona. So for all these reasons, I decided to attend his reading to see him again and invite him to dinner.

When Tom arrived he was obviously in bad physical shape, walking with a cane slowly, haltingly, and seemingly painfully, and otherwise seeming in fragile health, and de-energized. He seemed depressed and somehow a bit out of it when we spoke briefly before he went on about our mutual publishing woes and the de-

pressed state of so-called major SF publishing that had relegated him to small press author status, and about his terrible real estate woes which I would hear more of later.

But as soon as he went on to even introduce his reading from *The Word of God*, his demeanor and energy level went through a drastic positive transformation.

The conceit of *The Word of God*, if that is what you would like to call it and what it certainly was to Thomas M. Disch in literary terms, is that the book is not a novel, not a collection of stories and poems, but a confessional autobiography in which he reveals for the first time that he is God, presents His version of various Truths, and, good-naturedly though rather diffidently for the Deity, invites the reader and anyone else who might care to worship Him.

Well, any one who knew Tom Disch personally or who has read much of his fiction and particularly his novel *The Priest*, in which he gives what for to the Church and its clergy, will know that this is neither an attempt at piety nor sincere Divine Madness—indeed, not sincere at all, but a final massive dose of Thomas M. Disch's peculiar knife-edged brand of superciliously tinged irony, or ironic superciliousness. It's the sort of irony that allowed him to write a short story called "Feathers From the Wings of an Angel," which is a deadpan and perfect fictional reproduction of a piece of prize-winning inspirational Christian fiction but not quite satirical at all.

It was in precisely this spirit that Tom introduced his reading, announcing his Godhood, inviting worship in a genial and undemanding manner, beaming and grinning with a not quite fatuous not quite uncomical deadpan demeanor, and lit up like, well, the proverbial Christmas tree, come fully alive with charismatic energy and seeming to be enjoying himself immensely—a brightness, good humor, and strength that continued throughout his reading.

Tom always was a powerful, humor-

ous, well-schooled dramatic reader, who somehow made the listening experience all the more enjoyable by the way he so clearly enjoyed doing it himself—a reader with the talent of a Harlan Ellison who didn't exactly take himself seriously, but wasn't exactly taking the piss out of himself either—a mode that mirrored much of his written fiction, particularly his short fiction, and some of his poetry.

The section of *The Word of God* that he chose to read was a previously published short story called "The New Me," in which the first person narrator, a nebishy teacher, must change his personality to become more assertive for career reasons. This story was written long before *The Word of God*, but Disch neatly segues into it with a sequence of reminiscences about his one-time infatuation with Western gear and fashion, including the notion that if Jesus had been incarnated in our time, it would have been as the "Good Cowboy." This is a perfect segue because a cowboy persona is the first one that the story's narrator adapts, and the story itself has him ending up a born again cowboy Christian of a particularly sleazy and hilarious cheapjack type.

This will give you a hint of only one aspect of *The Word of God*, and not really the dominant one, the point here for present purposes being that Tom Disch went through his whole performance with such enjoyment and such high energy that even his physical impairments seemed to be magically burned away by it, along with his previous depressive state.

After the reading there's a sort of group dinner in a bar/restaurant several blocks away. Tom could only walk there very slowly and effortfully and I lagged back with him. In the restaurant, all that bright energy had drained away, and if he didn't seem quite depressive, he seemed sort of sadly resigned to his luckless and seemingly terminal state.

His career as a novelist, in commercial terms, was hopelessly in the shitter. Tachyon, a well-regarded small press with a literarily impressive list, was doing *The Word of God* and maybe other ti-

tles, but a small press like Tachyon paying minimal advances and offering no realistic hope of significant royalties afterward could only acquire such a list because other such literarily major SF writers could no longer place their books with the so-called majors. Tom seemed almost at peace with this as we discussed it in the restaurant—or perhaps more accurately in retrospect—had given up the struggle.

And he had a tale of real estate horrors impressive even for New York. He and Charlie had long had a good rental apartment in an excellent location off Union Square in lower Manhattan and later a country place. The country place was destroyed by a flood. Union Square had become *très chic*, in the advanced stage of yuppification, and the landlord there wanted to cash in on it by evicting his tenant by hook and/or by crook and selling the apartment as a co-op or condo for big bucks.

Now just as there are many ways for a landlord in New York to squeeze a tenant out of a rental apartment in order to sell it, legally punctilious and otherwise, so there are many ways for said tenant to fight a delaying action and turn a would-be real estate blitzkrieg on the part of the landlord into a forever war at least as lengthy as the one in Iraq.

But when I pointed this out to Tom, he shrugged it off, admitting he had no more fight left in him. His health was bad and getting no better, his career as a novelist had been shit-canned by the devolution of the publishing industry into condition terminal, and he was soon to be evicted, which in Manhattan where the chances of finding an affordable new apartment for someone in his financial circumstances are slim and none, that meant either out on the street, or way out in the boonies of the so-called "Outer Boroughs."

That was when Tom spoke quite calmly, rationally, and all too logically, of suicide.

What he didn't mention in the laundry list of good reasons to kill himself was

the fairly recent death of Charlie Naylor after a long, grim illness. Dona and I had been friends with Tom and Charlie when we had been together in the 1970s. We broke up and didn't come back together until 9/11, but Tom and Charlie had been together continuously for over three decades. Like Tom, Charlie was a published poet. Like Dona and I during both phases of our relationship, Tom and Charlie had another life together outside the pocket universe of science fiction. They shared many common interests. They loved each other. Though I do not really believe there is any such thing as the perfect couple, they came as close to it as any I knew.

Tom wouldn't quite say it, so I said it for him. All that stuff is indeed terrible, but hardly the worst of it. By far the worst of it is the death of Charlie. You've lost the love of your life.

Once I had acknowledged it, so did he. And under the circumstances what was really left to live for? Wouldn't suicide be a rational and logical act? And I could only sort of acknowledge that it was, realizing that he was seriously considering it, but not that he had already planned it out.

But still, twice I had confronted friends seriously considering suicide. And twice I had talked them out of it and neither they nor I had ended up regretting it. So I told Tom what I had told Phil Dick under a similar circumstance.

Phil and I had never met or even talked before when he called me one night from Vancouver, though I had read most of his novels and admired them greatly, and he had obviously read at least one of my stories.

"This is Phil Dick," he began as if we were old friends, "I'm in a bin in Vancouver, my girlfriend has left me, I'm very depressed, and I'm considering killing myself. But I read your story *Carcinoma Angels* and I want to ask your opinion first, because I've got an offer from a professor at Cal State Fullerton in Orange County to go down there and be taken care of. So tell me, be honest about it, in

your opinion, should I move to Orange County or kill myself?"

"Well, Phil," I replied in like mode off the top of my head, "personally I can't stand Orange County. But on the other hand, you can always kill yourself later."

"Yeah, that makes sense," said Phil, and he moved to Orange County, remained there until his death from natural causes, continued with his writing, got married again, fathered another child, and became my good friend.

I told this story to Tom Disch as a form of the same advice in the hope that he would follow it with similar results. "I can't go on, I'll go on," as the famous line from Samuel Beckett has it.

Instead, what I got from him was a totally unexpected reaction not to my argument against suicide but to Philip K. Dick.

It was not complimentary and it was not very coherent. He had only met Phil once, and according to Tom over booze and a bong, and it had something to do with Phil writing a letter to the FBI tipping Tom as some kind of subversive or even a Communist or an agent of the KGB.

Well, anyone who had even read Paul Williams' long piece in *Rolling Stone* about, among other things, the break-in in Phil's apartment and Phil's rather paranoid opinion of American spy and security agencies and how they were out to get him, let alone knew Phil personally, could only find this ridiculously off the wall, and I just let it drop.

Then Tom shot himself on July 4, *Independence Day*, as if to make the kind of poetic metaphoric point on the way out of which Thomas M. Disch was fully capable.

And then I read *The Word of God*.

What to make of this book?

What could anyone make of this book if Thomas M. Disch hadn't killed himself shortly after its launch, in retrospect as part of its launch, indeed as the caper, indeed on July 4 as a deliberately timed Declaration of Independence from the

karmic travails of his life, real and fantasized?

I can't do that. And now nobody can. Tom saw to that.

What can anyone who didn't know Tom and didn't know Phil make of this book?

Obviously I can't do that either.

*The Word of God* is not a novel. *The Word of God* is not a memoir. *The Word of God* is not a collection of previously published fiction and poetry. *The Word of God* is not a metaphysical and philosophical meditation on God, the Universe, and Everything, nor a satirical piss-take on same. *The Word of God* is not a post-mortem fond farewell nor an angry post-mortem score-settling.

It is a jumble of all of these things together, formally incoherent yet philosophically and metaphysically erudite and cogent, bitterly ironic yet with a blithely humorous spirit, an angry bird flipped in the faces of whatever gods there be and an elegiac yet somehow upbeat series of meditations on Tom's own impending and apparently already planned death. And all of it beautifully and expertly written, proving, if nothing else, that yes, Thomas M. Disch was a writer great enough to do all these things at once, and in retrospect, that he had been doing it all along, that this is the story of his career, his legacy, his tragic legacy.

First as tragedy, then as farce, as Karl Marx said of history repeating itself.

With Thomas M. Disch, with the writings of which he was capable, with the story arc of his career, with *The Word of God*, his deliberately crafted swan song, it was and is both at the same time.

There are fine poems in this book that maybe approach greatness, that at any rate have a clarity and lucidity that so much modern or post-modern poetry lacks. Tom Disch was a prolific poet and a well-regarded one, by my ignorant lights better than many with greater reputations in such circles.

There is mean-spirited score-settling in *The Word of God*, with his ex-agent,



with the world of publishing that failed him. There is high-spirited and hilarious score-settling with fundamentalist Christianity. There are serious and also satirical learned philosophical and moral meditations. There is humorous autobiography with the jokes as often as not on himself. His love for Charles Naylor and the agonies and small triumphs of Charlie's long struggle with cancer are touchingly delineated.

But the centerpiece of *The Word of God*, discontinuously embedded in all this, to which the plurality of wordage is devoted, is a bitchy, mean-spirited, utterly bizarre piece of apparently score-settling fantasy, in which the main characters are fictional avatars of Philip K. Dick, Thomas Mann, and Disch's own mother. And Disch himself as "God."

Difficult indeed to attempt to summarize this discontinuously presented tale, let alone make any literary sense of it, and I would be disingenuous if I did not admit that as both a friend of the late Phil Dick and an enthusiastic admirer of his oeuvre, I am appalled, and being a friend and admirer of the oeuvre of Thomas M. Disch makes it even worse.

Philip K. Dick is in hell, Disch's concept of an appropriate Dickian hell; a domestic and serially endlessly repetitive nightmare reminiscent in that respect of *Groundhog Day*, with demonic persecution piled on. Why he has been condemned to hell in moral terms is to say the least unclear; for writing a lot of schlock in his earlier career to stay financially afloat maybe; for his unfortunate choice of a series of mates in life perhaps; for, uh, denouncing Disch to the FBI—or at least that's all that seems to be on the pages.

Back in the 1940s, Thomas M. Disch's mother is hanging out in the lobby of a Minneapolis hotel where she is destined to have a one-night stand with an aged European gentleman that will produce the very author of this disjointed tale. A bit later in the narrative, Disch's would-be father is revealed as none other than Thomas Mann, the great German au-

thor, herein depicted in a not very favorable light, who, as in the real world, has sought refuge in the United States from Nazi Germany.

Phil Dick, in an appropriately shape-shifting demonic incarnation, is sent back in time and to Minneapolis to prevent this from happening, to prevent Tom Disch from being born as the illegitimate son of Thomas Mann by killing Mann, which will somehow give the Nazis a second chance to win World War II, and make Satan, in the guise of Phil Dick, or vice versa, President of the United States forever, in place of George W. Bush, who will take his place in hell.

Why?

Because Disch stole the idea of Dick's alternate world novel *The Man in the High Castle* in which the Nazis did win the war and turned it into his novel *Camp Concentration*, turning it into "a Communist type of story," which is also why, in our real world, chez Disch, Dick tipped him to the FBI and "got to be friends with J. Edgar Hoover."

Though to make this even crazier and more confusing, Disch, in a footnote, declares that Dick denounced him to Hoover in October 1972, after Hoover was already dead. Though of course, this footnote, like the rest of the Dick story where its fiction nature is obvious, could be, and probably must be, taken as fiction.

Tom Disch, God in this literary creation, incarnates as a juvenile version of his then unborn self, and travels back in time to Minneapolis in the company of a murderous crook to foil this Satanically Dickian plot.

In the dénouement, at the end of much hugger-mugger, Mann is killed, Disch-as-God resurrects him, but nevertheless, it is not Mann who screws Disch's mother in the hotel room and may or may not have sired the author of this thing, but Disch's murderous companion.

I am not making this up.

Thomas M. Disch made it up in a book pretty clearly meant to be his last literary word on the brink of his pre-planned suicide.

But why? Why would Disch leave such a mean-spirited and, it must be said, evil-minded, dissing of Philip K. Dick behind as a literary testament? Why would he drag in a bitchy portrait of Thomas Mann in the bargain? Why would he give such a parting finger to the memory of his own mother?

Crazier still, or maybe in some twisted way not, included in *The Word of God* is a poem, "Ode on the Death of Philip K. Dick," written in 1982, which is part snide commentary on Dick's life and legend, part attack on the film studio that, chez Disch, butchered *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* into *Blade Runner*, and part elegy which ends with:

"Well, Philip, have I said it yet? The bitter,  
Insufficient truth? I love you. It's not a love  
To ease your feet from the concrete shoes  
Of your completed oeuvre, nor yet a love  
To warm your flesh or even earn you Royalties. But let me say, for all your fans,  
I love you, and I know that you'll return,  
Our divo redivivus, each time your voice  
Is summoned from the earth to tell its tale."

Well, this may not tell us anything about why Thomas M. Disch felt the need to trash Thomas Mann or his own mother on the way out, nor can I even attempt to deal with that herein. But this poem just may be the key to his literary love-hate affair with his self-created virtual version of a Philip K. Dick he never really knew as a man.

In the pages of this very magazine there once appeared an essay that I wrote called *Sturgeon, Vonnegut, and Trout*, an exploration of the relationship, in Vonnegut's own work, in Vonnegut's own literary psyche, between Kilgore Trout, the schlocko and perpetually im-

pecunious science fiction writer who appeared in many of his books, and the real science fiction writer, Theodore Sturgeon, whom Vonnegut so openly proclaimed Trout to be the satiric avatar of by his choice of name.

In Vonnegut's fiction, Trout is a pathetic figure churning out reams of literarily third-rate novels and stories at high speed to stay financially afloat, a failure in economic terms and in terms of literary recognition. Yet in the real world, the real Theodore Sturgeon was a great stylist and craftsman who produced his comparatively few works slowly, with difficulty, and was frequently blocked.

In the real world, Vonnegut achieved fame, fortune, and literary acclaim, on a level that Theodore Sturgeon never even approached. In the real world, Kurt Vonnegut was indeed a great writer, deserving of all that fortune and acclaim. But in the real world, in terms of empathy, psychological depth, conceptual brilliance, loving wisdom, and the ability to touch the human intellect, consciousness, and spirit, Theodore Sturgeon was a greater writer still.

And from the evidence of his work, from the literary nature of his obsession with Kilgore Trout, I believed then, and I still believe, that Vonnegut knew it too. The world-reknowned literary celebrity and best-selling success was *envious* of the relatively obscure science fiction writer who lived and died in relative penury.

Envy, not jealousy. Not a mean-spirited envy, but a kind of affectionate, admiring, and wistful envy of Theodore Sturgeon, who despite a life of adversity, could persist in writing a level of fiction of which Vonnegut knew in his heart that he was not capable and indeed never really attempted.

I do believe, on the evidence of "Ode on the Death of Philip K. Dick" and more in *The Word of God*, that Thomas M. Disch had something of the same sort of literary envy of Philip K. Dick.

Disch was a fine writer, bordering on or perhaps achieving greatness. But as

Sturgeon was a greater writer than Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick was a greater writer than Thomas M. Disch too, arguably the greatest metaphysical novelist of all time in any language, and certainly the greatest in terms of connecting metaphysical morality to the lives of his characters through empathetic caritas. Not a stylist on the level of Disch, but more complete in human terms.

And, among many other things, Tom Disch was a literary critic, and a good one. It's hard to believe that on some level at least he didn't know this. And Disch, again on the literary evidence he has provided in *The Word of God*, must have felt something far more galling than the envy of Vonnegut for Sturgeon.

Vonnegut's career was a public triumph that utterly eclipsed Sturgeon's in that realm. But the magic power of Hollywood has raised Philip K. Dick to posthumous permanent literarily stardom, while Thomas M. Disch's tragic fate was to see his career slide downhill through no literary fault of his own into the commercial dead end of small press publication and public obscurity, leading him at least in part to write something like *The Word of God* as his own obituary for himself before declaring his surrender, his independence from the struggle, with a gun on the Fourth of July.

But if that sort of reluctantly admiring envy explains Disch's love/hate relationship with Philip K. Dick, and his failing health, dead-end real estate situation and loss of the love of his life explains his despair with his personal life, neither really explains his terminal surrender to the "failure" of his writing career, which, it would seem on the evidence of *The Word of God*, was a necessary contributing factor to his decision to end it all.

After all, others have lost the loves of their lives and been motivated to go on by transpersonal passions. Others have persisted in the face of even more dire financial circumstances. R. Crumb's wife once told me that her husband almost would prefer to be a "brain in a bottle," and Steven Hawking produced his great

work and took manifest pleasure in it in effect condemned to just such a worldly fate.

Nor was Thomas M. Disch a "failed writer" in any but latter-day commercial terms towards the end of his career. Between *The Genocides*, published in 1965, and *The Priest*, published in 1995, over a dozen of his novels were published either by "major" SF lines or major mainstream imprints, as well as several short story collections, to general critical acclaim. And while none of them became big sellers that secured him fame and fortune, they did well enough to allow him to make an acceptable living as a novelist for three decades.

He was also an accomplished poet of considerable serious reknown, prolifically productive to the very end, and a literary and theater critic. And while such writings are not about to earn anyone a living wage, as credits, especially when basked with the novels, they would have been more than enough to secure Disch some kind of academic sinecure that would have rescued him from his practical dilemmas had he used his academic and literary connections to seek one out.

And it can fairly be said that Tom Disch was a writer of passion for the work. His was a literary life, a life in literature, as creator and as critic, to the very end. Nor had his skills and literary powers burned out or his love for writing and his pleasure taken in it flagged. Even *The Word of God*, fragmentary, formless, deliberately self-indulgent, marred on a content level by bitter score-settling, what Brian Aldiss once called "a decent despair," and envy of Philip K. Dick, displays all of Disch's considerable literary powers and even high-spirited sense of sardonic fun.

He had good reasons to say "I can't go on," but he had one big reason to say "I'll go on."

So why didn't he?

Thomas M. Disch also wrote two book-length critical screeds about science fiction, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*:

*How Science Fiction Conquered the World* and *On SF*. Neither of these were exactly love letters to the genre. Both of them were written after he left "SF" for forays into "major mainstream publications" whose numbers in these dim days pretty much ended up destroying his commercial viability as a novelist even with so-called "major SF lines."

Damned if he did, damned if he didn't.

Thomas M. Disch wrote more speculative fiction than anything else, but he was never really an "SF writer." His thematic and literary interests were far too deep, wide, and catholic to be comfortably contained in any genre. No devotee of "the pulp tradition" was he, and his literary toolbox was far beyond "transparent prose."

Yet struggle against it though he did, he was *confined* by the SF pocket universe, unable to successfully transcend his stereotyping as a "sci-fi guy" in the realm of publishing commerce, and to a lesser extent in the wider literary realm, to which he sought entry and where he really belonged.

The irony of it being that his very literary concerns were such that as "genre SF" was the only way that his earlier fiction could be published at all, and by the time he tried to "break out" it was too late.

The bitter irony.

For at the end of his career, major SF lines now being what they have become, there was no direction home. A writer like Thomas M. Disch was not deemed commercially viable by them either.

In the end, it was "SF" that abandoned him.

"What killed science fiction?" is a question often asked these days, and the answer offered are multiplex. But the question that is the title of this essay, in the end perhaps has a simple and stark answer.

What killed Tom Disch?

SF killed Tom Disch.

It killed what should have been his last hope, the last thing he had left to live for, and so killed his spirit, and left

him with nothing left to do but follow it out of this world.

And yet. . . .

And yet while lying in bed brooding on such matters I experienced one of those glaring epiphanies that seem so obvious that you wonder why you have never seen it before. But on second thought, I understood what had blinded me to the obvious, and what had tragically blinded Tom Disch, too.

We writers of science fiction, of fantasy, of SF, are not like other writers. Most writers only meet their readers for a few moments in autograph sessions, via the occasional letters that reach them through publishers. But SF writers meet them by the hundreds, by the thousands, at SF conventions and on blog sites dedicated to our praise and/or the reverse maintained by these ingroup devotees. I have been told that Tom Disch did have some sort of blogsite that he read and posted to regularly. But I wonder what sort of people he reached on it, and more importantly, how wide a spectrum of the readers of his actual broad spectrum fiction reached him. We become embedded in the SF subculture, in fandom, unless we make deliberate efforts not to be, and even then. . . .

We end up believing that these are our readers, that what we leave in their memories, that how we affect their lives, is our legacy, whatever footprints we may leave in the sands of time. All too many SF writers seem to believe this. I suspect Tom believed it. I believed it.

I was wrong.

Perhaps it is only fitting that it was technology that showed me I was wrong.

The Internet. My own self-created and maintained web site, where I chose to embed an email link through which I can be reached directly, and Google, where a little hacking magic causes the web site with the email link to come up first when my name is Googled. Simple and geeky as that.

And the result is that I get emails, thank you notes from people who know nothing about me but something of mine

# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

**FiestaCon (Westercon 62), July 2-5, 2009.** Tempe Mission Palms, Tempe, Arizona, [www.fiestacon.org](http://www.fiestacon.org)  
Artist GoH Todd Lockwood, Author GoH Alan Dean Foster, Editor GoH Stanley Schmidt, Toastmasters Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, plus 1632 minicon with Eric Flint. Email: [FiestaCon@leprecon.org](mailto:FiestaCon@leprecon.org), Phone: 480-945-6890 Write: FiestaCon, C/o Leprecon, Inc., PO Box 26665 Tempe, AZ 85285

## MISCELLANEOUS

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that they've read, maybe everything, maybe only a single novel or story, that had positive meaning for their lives. They know nothing of the SF subculture, nothing of BookScan numbers, sales figures, marketing strategies, the commercial apparatus of the professional life of a writer, only what the work itself has meant in their own lives.

By sales figures, they are few, maybe a thousand or so over a year, but they are only the ones sufficiently moved to write, and of course I can never know how many others who don't bother have felt the same thing.

In karmic terms, the bottom line is not the bottom line. We forget that. We are

blinded not by the light but by the darkness. For is it not a greater thing than the numbers on royalty statements or the winning or losing of Hugos and Nebulas to have so touched the hearts and consciousnesses of even a few hundred people over the course of one's life so deeply? It's a gift of the nature of the work itself. How many people other than writers can be so blessed?

I am certain by the nature of *his* work that if Tom Disch had set up the same mechanism he would have received the same encouragement, the same blessing. It's enough for me.

Would it not have been enough to keep *him* going on? ○



# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

**L**unaCon, MidSouthCon, MillenniCon and CoastCon (the 20th to 22nd of March) are oriented toward our kind of SF. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## MARCH 2009

- 6-8—**MarsCon**. For info, write: Box 21213, Eagan MN 55121. Or phone: (651) 339-0397 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [marscon.org](http://marscon.org). (E-mail) [Info@marscon.org](mailto:Info@marscon.org). Con will be held in: Bloomington MN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn. Guests will include: Scott Rosema, Suzanne Hiza-Rosema, Jeanne Cavelos, Wally Pleasant. Low-key relaxacon.
- 6-8—**ConSonnance**. [consonance.org](http://consonance.org). Crowne Plaza, Milpitas CA. Dockrey, Fabris, Bertke, Sampson. SF/fantasy folksinging.
- 6-8—**Creation**. (818) 409-0960. [creationentl.com](http://creationentl.com). Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ. Commercial media-oriented event.
- 6-8—**ChilmaeraCon**. [chilmaeracon.com](http://chilmaeracon.com). Crossroads Convention Center, San Antonio TX. Gaming, anime, SF fantasy.
- 6-8—**VulKon**. (954) 888-9697. [vulkon.com](http://vulkon.com). Hilton North, Orlando FL. Media-oriented commercial event.
- 7—**Time Quest**. [tenthplanetevents.co.uk](http://tenthplanetevents.co.uk). London UK. Tom Baker, Louise Jameson, Nicholas Courtney. Dr. Who.
- 12-15—**Anime Oasis**. [animeoasis.org](http://animeoasis.org). [creamyjeremy@animeoasis.org](mailto:creamyjeremy@animeoasis.org). Airport Holiday Inn, Boise ID.
- 13-15—**All-Con**. (817) 472-6368. [all-con.org](http://all-con.org). Crowne Plaza, Addison (Dallas) TX. Emphasizing media and costuming.
- 13-15—**StellarCon**. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). Radisson, Greensboro NC. Wold, Stout, Wick, Pederson, Brinegar, Dan Johnson, Maxey.
- 13-15—**Corflu**. [corflu.org](http://corflu.org). Hotel Deca, Seattle WA. "A convention for fanzine fans," especially old-time fanzines.
- 13-15—**Wizard World**. (954) 565-6588. [wizardworld.com](http://wizardworld.com). Convention Center. Los Angeles CA. Big comics/media event.
- 13-15—**Fear Fest**. [fearfest.com](http://fearfest.com). Mesquite (Dallas) TX. Horror media.
- 13-15—**Monster Mania**. (856) 307-9124. [monstermania.net](http://monstermania.net). Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ. T. Hooper, F. Balk. Horror film.
- 13-16—**RevelCon**. [severalunlimited.com/revelcon](http://severalunlimited.com/revelcon). Houston TX. Long-time convention for fans of adult media fanzines.
- 18-22—**ICFA**, Box 3701, Youngstown OH 44513. [iafa.org](http://iafa.org). Airport Marriott, Orlando FL. B. Aldiss. Academic conference.
- 19-22—**Furry Weekend**, Box 1511, Madison AL 35758. [furryweekend.com](http://furryweekend.com). Hilton, Atlanta GA. Ebel. Anthropomorphics.
- 20-22—**LunaCon**, Box 432, New York NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Freer, Dixon, Lackey, Flint, Grossman.
- 20-22—**MidSouthCon**, Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187. [midsouthcon.org](http://midsouthcon.org). Olive Branch MS. Mike Resnick, Vincent Di Fate.
- 20-22—**MillenniCon**, 5818 Wilmington Pike, #122, Centerville OH 45459. (513) 659-2258. Cincinnati OH. Scalzi, T. Smith.
- 20-22—**CoastCon**, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. [coastcon.org](http://coastcon.org). Coliseum. D. Weber, M. Moorcock, L. Brom, K. Burnside.
- 20-22—**FantaSciCon**, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741. [fantascicon.com](http://fantascicon.com). Howard Johnson's Plaza, Chattanooga TN.
- 26-29—**AggieCon**, Cepheid Variable (958460), Box 5688, College Station TX 77844. (979) 268-3068. [aggiecon.tamu.edu](http://aggiecon.tamu.edu).
- 27-29—**Ad Astra**, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. [ad-astra.org](http://ad-astra.org). Crowne Plaza Don Valley. D. Drake, T. Pierce, T. Zahn.
- 27-29—**Leap Back**, Box 7122, Mt. Airy NC 27030. [leapback2009.com](http://leapback2009.com). Los Angeles CA. Bakula, Stockwell. Quantum Leap.
- 27-29—**Naruto-Star Trek Con**, Box 970131, Boca Raton FL 33497. (561) 479-3872. Ft. Lauderdale FL. Anime/Trek.
- 27-29—**PortmeirCon**, 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19454. [portmeircon.com](http://portmeircon.com). Portmeirion, UK. "The Prisoner" TV show.
- 28—**WASFEn Con**, 520 Hamilton #3, Wausau WI 54403. (715) 571-1873. [myspace.com/wasfen](http://myspace.com/wasfen). SF, comics, gaming.

## APRIL 2009

- 3-5—**Icon**, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. [iconsf.org](http://iconsf.org). Suffolk C. C. College, Brentwood NY. Thousands expected.
- 3-5—**WillyCon**, S. C. #103, WSC, 1111 Main, Wayne NE 68797. [wildcat.wsc.edu/clubs/willycon](http://wildcat.wsc.edu/clubs/willycon). Wayne State College.
- 3-5—**FILKONtario**, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. [filkontario.ca](http://filkontario.ca). Delta, Mississauga ON. SF/f folksinging.

## AUGUST 2009

- 6-10—**Anticipation**, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$/C\$215+.

## SEPTEMBER 2010

- 2-6—**Aussiecon 4**, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [aussiecon4.org.au](http://aussiecon4.org.au). World SF Convention. US\$90+.



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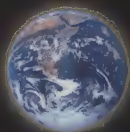
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